

2024-05-01

Deal with a Dead Man

Afton Reed
University of Texas at El Paso

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reed, Afton, "Deal with a Dead Man" (2024). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 4138.
https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd/4138

This is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

DEAL WITH A DEAD MAN

AFTON REED

Master's Program in Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Daniel Chacón, Chair, M.F.A.

Sylvia Aguilar, M.F.A.

Frank G. Pérez, Ph.D.

Stephen Crites, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

DEAL WITH A DEAD MAN

by

AFTON REED, B.S.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2024

Acknowledgements

I would first like to express my sincerest gratitude to my Thesis Chair, Professor Daniel Chacón of the Online Creative Writing Department at The University of Texas at El Paso. He has consistently been there via text and phone call during the thesis process, and has a way of asking just the right questions. I wouldn't have even considered this as a viable project if not for his classes on writing with physics, dreams, and the occult. His constant encouragement to harness my imagination and let it take me wherever I needed to go has been invaluable.

A big thanks to Sylvia Aguilar of the Online Creative Writing Department, who first agreed to be part of my thesis committee and pointed out where my writing showed the most potential. I'm also grateful to Frank Pérez of the Communications Department for his willingness to join my thesis committee as the outside eyes. I couldn't have asked for better.

My gratitude must also go to my many colleagues who were writing and reading right along with me throughout the program. My thesis wouldn't be the same without their input.

Last of all, I would thank my family and friends, who have patiently put up with my stints of barricading myself away because I had an idea, and always believed this would be worth it, even when I didn't. I can't thank everyone enough.

The Value of Fantasy in Exploring Intangibles

Often, a story is sparked because of asking the question, “what if?” which is what happened to create the hydra that is *Deal with a Dead Man*. Two percolating ideas happened to coincide, and eventually crashed together. Early on, it began when I was introduced to the Russian fairytale of Koschei the Deathless and his fear of death, but inability to enjoy life. Over the past year, my family experienced several deaths, one tragically early, and another of ripe old age. My fascination with the fairytale grew as I watched myself and family members react in different, even opposite, ways to death. A little later, while working with my teenage creative writing students a very specific character emerged; a boy named Curi who could see everyone’s moment of death and found himself employed by a man who was already dead. Looking back, I was projecting my own conflicting attitudes about death into Curi’s creation, and I never intended him to be anything else except a teaching demonstration. However, my students wanted to know more, wanted to know where the boy’s story would go. It was then a new question emerged: what if Koschei, the deathless sorcerer, originally had help to become deathless? In the fairytale he’s obviously not very good at being a loner, as he continually steals princesses and fair maids to keep him company. This new character, Curi, seemed to know the answers, not only to the sorcerer’s dilemma, but my own morbid questions. The two morphed, Curi’s employer taking on a role similar to that of the fairytale sorcerer, searching for a way to never taste of death for a second time, and young Curi discovering exactly what his own relationship to death and life meant. *Deal with a Dead Man* is a fantasy novel in the tradition of exploring fairytales from a different perspective, the interplay between opposites such as death and life, and the hero’s universal struggles in choosing a correct path.

First and foremost, the question arises, why write a fantasy? I have often been told it is not a serious genre, that it is something to be read when you don't want to think. I speculate that this attitude became ingrained during the 1960s and 1970s when works such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Peter Beagle's *The Last Unicorn*, as well as others, made their way into popular culture. The rise of movies and animation, Disney being the reigning champion, reinvented traditional fairytales and marketed them for all audiences, especially children, thereby helping to entrench the attitude that myths, fairytales, and fantasy, were less than serious. Now, are these stories entertaining? Yes. Did their authors and creators set out to do more than tell a compelling story? Not necessarily. However, there is something to be said for providing an escapist space for a reader to explore life's difficulties divorced from an accurate similitude of reality.

Not long ago, the British Library hosted a conversation between Neil Gaiman and Roz Kaveney entitled, "Why We Need Fantasy: Neil Gaiman in Conversation." Kaveney expresses that "fantasy is a way of making things more real than the real," while Gaiman explains that he enjoys making metaphors concrete. They discuss how fantasy is a "reconciliation of the mundane and the miraculous" ("Why We Need Fantasy"). Peter Beagle provides an excellent example of this as he frequently addresses the subject of regret and mortality; two very real things that are made more real through the lens of a fantasy. The character of the unicorn states, "I have been mortal, and some part of me is mortal yet. I am full of tears and hunger and the fear of death, though I cannot weep, and I want nothing, and I cannot die...I regret" (Beagle 289). The reader is asked not only to examine their own regrets and desires, but what it would be like not to have them. Through the use of a mythical, immortal unicorn, Beagle is able to express something very basically human in a manner that speaks to our imagination, and even to a level of spirituality. This is what a fantasy can do.

In my own life, fantasy has always made it simpler to examine reality as a whole; the known and the unknown, tangible and intangible, all at once. Faced with my speculations on one of the world's greatest unknowns, death, I have needed to employ imagination. As Einstein once said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world" (Lachman 127). To be fair, Einstein is referring more to imagination as an essential of scientific discovery. However, fantasy allows me to imagine a reality in which death, and life, can be treated more tangibly, where I can make "metaphor[s] concrete" ("Why We Need Fantasy").

The characters of Curi and Lord Vasilik provide two opposing perspectives on the theme of death. On the one hand, Curi accepts that death is inevitable. Lord Vasilik rejects such inevitability, having already died, and come back. He continues to "live," seemingly without consequence, although upon first meeting him, Curi says there is "a palpable wrongness to him that grated and crashed against my every nerve" (Reed 24). He cannot deny that Lord Vasilik has turned what he knows to be impossible on its head. He is left to question, what does death mean, what really happens after that initial moment of dying, and are there consequences of avoiding death. The hope is that Curi's opinions of death gradually shift from an indifference to a more active understanding, and in contrast, Curi must begin to consider what he wants in life.

While delving more deeply into the theme of death, and Curi's journey with it, I realized that the story was full of polar opposites that emphasize the immediate conflict of life and death. In his book, *The Writer's Journey*, Christopher Vogler discusses how both in life and in a story, "Unity begets duality; the existence of one implies the possibility of two" (385). Vogler goes on to describe the polarized system, positive and negative, as two ends of a single line. "These polarities create potential for contrast, challenge, conflict, and learning. As the polarized nature of magnetic

fields can be used to generate electrical energy, polarity in a story seems to be an engine that generates tension and movement in the characters and a stirring of emotions in the audience” (386). How do these opposites present within *Deal with a Dead Man*, and how do they also work in shaping the characters and story? One of the main ways life and death come to be highlighted throughout the story is constant references to the forces of day and night, light and darkness. Most of the story takes place at night, which in turn forces the characters to constantly make use of candles and fires to see, or wait for daylight. For example, as the story begins, Curi wakes from a nightmare and cannot get rid of it until dawn.

The sky was lightening, the tree trunks beginning to change from dead black to frosted, ash-browns. I picked a fallen log and sat down, drawing my feet up out of the snow, and watched the eastern sky fade white with dawn. The heavy stillness of the night vanished with the shadows the moment the sun slivered over the horizon, allowing me to let go of the last vestiges of the dream.

I needed to head back. Like most towns, the majority of Avishki’s population were up with the sun, and I had a job to do. I slid off the log, crouched and drew a sunflower in the snow with my finger, acknowledging the Bright gods influence in another day (Reed 4).

Curi is inundated with juxtaposing symbolism, constantly using language to emphasize what he knows to be the natural order. Even the deities are categorized into bright or dark, supposedly making the world easy to understand. But again, the entrance of Lord Vasilik, his request, and duality of both death and life, blur the dual extremes, forcing Curi to reconsider what he knows and figure out where on the spectrum he is.

As a compliment to the themes and dualities, consideration must be given to the world being built. Within the world of the story, particularly a fantastical story, the author must create “an internal logic...even if their internal logic is to be illogical” (Temple). So, what is the internal logic of *Deal with a Dead Man*, and why is it important to the story and to the genre? This is twofold, including the magical worldbuilding elements integral to a fantasy which Temple is referring to, and the use of the hero’s journey in concert with the fairytale.

During my time in the MFA program, I have been introduced to various theories of how our imaginations interact with our physical world, including our long history with religion and the occult. In his famous book on the history of the occult, Colin Wilson admits that his own fascination with “magic and mysticism” began because “they were an escape from the world of factories and neurotic landladies, [and] because they confirmed my intuition of another order of reality, *an intenser and more powerful form of consciousness* than the kind I seemed to share with eight million other Londoners” (46). My intentions with *Deal with a Dead Man* were to create the feel of “another order of reality.” Rather than the feel of a full-on epic Dungeons and Dragons type of fantasy, I wanted it to be a bit more down to earth, so to speak. The sort of fantasy in which you could see influences from our own history, where things such as premonitions and fortune telling were not unfamiliar to reality, and felt anchored to our own various forms of mysticism and the occult. True to the fairytale, the scientific logic of reality sometimes just doesn’t work, and that affects how the characters act and interact with the world. The character of Curi embodies ideas of mysticism in that he believes that his premonitions guide him where he should go in life, and while it is never expressed aloud, appears to subconsciously assume he will be led to something better.

The premonition still lingered, like a flame that wouldn't go out, but there was no reason I should be afraid for my life. I put another bunch of [pine] needles in my mouth, walked on to find another stand of young trees.

My last premonition had led me to Peytik's caravan six months ago. Four months before that, I'd understood how to escape from my father and Maxim's army. Each time I had known it, as sure as I knew death, and the Harvester, came for everyone. But at least they had made sense (Reed 4).

Here, Curi magnifies the mystical worldbuilding elements within the story. He is a fortune teller who, apart from seeing death, periodically deals with knowing what will happen to himself. How many people have had moments like that? Moments when we know, in some unexplainable way and from a source outside of ourselves, that something is going to happen? Within our own reality in which most people would agree, Colin Wilson included, that magic was generally "a first crude attempt at science" (47), Something like a premonition can be explained. However, within the logic of the story, just as in a fairytale, Curi's skills and powers are taken as fact. This is clear when Curi is initially introduced to the dead man, Lord Vasilik, and what he wants Curi to do: "'The sort of things you already do; tell fortunes, make charms, and predict when a man's life will end.' Heat crept into my face. He knew" (Reed 26).

All throughout the narrative, Curi uses rune bones to find answers to difficult questions:

My hand wavered, the bones feeling almost hot.

The wolf's dead eyes loomed, as though it were still watching me. I'd start there. I sucked in a breath through my teeth, asked my first question: "How do we get rid of the dead wolf?"

The bones dropped from my hand, clicking against each other as they fell. One stuck to the sweat of my palm, but I didn't shake it off. I turned my still open palm up, cupping the bone against my life line, enfolding it in my fist. I didn't look at it. Apparently, it wasn't meant to be part of the answer (Reed 76).

I take many liberties, fitting the overall how's and why's of Curi's power into the logic of the story. In the nature of a hero's journey, Curi's abilities increase from where he began. Eventually, he is not only able to see the moment of death, but also to "walk" along death's edge, to see a small part of what waits once mortal existence is severed.

Terrified, I slowly turned, and blinked in astonishment. The colors and frost were a misted field. Dry grass peeked through a thin skiff of snow, barely enough to hide the ground. It was difficult to see where mist ended and frost began. Carefully, I stood up, still holding the medallion. The colors were spread across the sky, half hidden by the mists; tinges of purple, faded green and shadowed blue, as of twilight just before the stars appear. In a strange way, it felt familiar, like the long fields of destruction in my dreams" (Reed 87-88).

For this, I needed a visual, a representation of what death would be like. Not only does it show Curi's progress, but muddies the strict opposition of death and life, dark and light, as the sky has color.

Again, there is a familiarity to the scene. Every religion and philosophy in the world has its own version of what death is like as a place, and as a state of mind. How many mythologies introduce a journey in which the hero must travel into death and then return? The world's earliest epic sees Gilgamesh endeavor to rescue Enkidu from death. The Japanese god Izanagi travels to the underworld to try and bring back his wife, Izanami. Dante spends quite some time in every level of the afterlife. And in at least one version of the tale of Koschei the Deathless, he can put

himself back together after being killed (“Myths and Legends”). It is a journey that everyone must experience in their own way. This is where fictions such as *Deal with a Dead Man* can again make use of the imagination and speak to the possible answers, providing differing perspectives. Margaret Atwood’s does this to the Greek afterlife in her book, *The Penelopiad*. “It’s dark here, as many have remarked. ‘Dark Death’, they used to say. ‘The gloomy halls of Hades’, and so forth. Well, yes, it is dark, but there are advantages – for instance, if you see someone you’d rather not speak to you can always pretend you haven’t recognized them” (Atwood 15). Here death is gloomy, where the dead wander around doing nothing much. Death is, in many ways, boring, yet Atwood adds the very small twist in that it allows the Penelope to ignore others more easily.

I wanted death to be a bit more dynamic than Atwood’s Hades, as visiting death is an important part of Curi’s journey. Within the context of a hero’s journey, not only does death figure as a place where Curi experiences several ordeals in preparation for fulfilling his bargain, but it becomes a place where he gets answers (Vogler 220). This reflects my own complicated reactions towards death. On the one hand, death is bleak, and that comes out in the snow-skiffed, misted field Curi finds himself in. It can feel intimidating, which comes through in the appearance of a dark line of trees. This place appears to truly be the edge of death, and so whatever lies beyond the trees is still an unknown. As I was contemplating and writing this description of death, I was surprised by the addition of a mentor figure, in the form of the god of death, or the Harvester. As in many fairytales, he serves to plant information that Curi will need, as well as act as a trickster, questioning Curi’s decisions. I also realized that without meaning to, I had made death a bit more like life; even after the inevitable act of dying, the dead still had to make a choice, to move on or remain in the fields.

One of the challenges I have experienced is in how to structure *Deal with a Dead Man*, as a large part of the story's internal logic comes from the fairytale of Koschei the Deathless. Curi's story begins prior to where the fairytale begins, and yet seems to be heading for a similar ending; with a princess escaping from, and destroying the sorcerer. Restructuring a fairytale is not new, neither is it new to closely follow the preestablished plot of these traditional tales, the author adding their own conjectures into the lives and opinions of the established characters, or added characters as in the case of Curi. The trouble was how to do it, as I had both pieces of Curi's original story, and the restructured fairytale. I went back to reading various novels that had inspired me, looking for what their authors had done to flawlessly weave various storylines together. I turned to *The Penelopiad*, as Atwood moves between Penelope's current dead state, her past while alive and waiting for Odysseus to return, and a Greek chorus of servant girls who were murdered. Each storyline contributes to the themes of Penelope's guilt over the girls' deaths and who is to blame. Patrick Rothfus and his novel *The Name of the Wind* follows a similar pattern, interchangeably narrating the past and the present with the character of Kvothe telling the story of his early days. I decided to try something similar with *Deal with a Dead Man*, renouncing a strict chronological order, and alternating between the fairytale storyline, and Curi's.

I discovered several problems to this narrative strategy of a story within a story. While the fairytale structure created parallels, such as Curi and the kidnapped princess Melet making a bargain similar to Curi's and Lord Vasilik's original one, it felt clunky.

Another difficulty that occurred accidentally was the use of both first person and third person narration. While it is not common, I have seen it used to great effect, providing a means of keeping parallel narrative and timelines distinctive. However, I wanted Curi to remain the primary, first-person narrator, keeping a closer psychic distance with the reader. Naturally, this creates more

of a bias, a limiting of information, and works very well to the development of themes. As Curi's opinion changes concerning death, so does the reader's, as he understands more about Lord Vasilik, so does the reader, etc. That didn't happen. Instead, his voice became lost in the back and forth.

Along with Curi's diminishing importance, I realized it would be impossible to keep some information from the reader. For example, Lord Vasilik is referred to as a "feeder," with only hints of what that means along the way. It is deliberately meant to keep a sense of mystery, and distance for the reader. I discovered the story was stalling, hesitating, and I had forgotten a cardinal rule: "The needs of the story dictate its structure," and that "stories are alive. They seem to be conscious and purposeful. Like living beings, stories have an agenda, something on their minds. They want something from you" (Vogler 266, 368).

In order to rectify my mistake, *Deal with a Dead Man* has been returned to chronological order. This does not mean that I have removed the fairytale, but placed it as a second part to Curi's original narrative. The reader has the opportunity to become invested in Curi before introducing the character of Melet. However, this second part is currently in the experimental stages and I may discover that it demands yet more structural changes.

As mentioned previously, fairytales touch on basic aspects of our human existence. They are also, very systematic, the characters serving specific functions that can be nearly interchangeable, allowing the reader to pick out the themes being expressed more easily. Vladimir Propp describes the interchangeability of the fairytale in this way:

The name of the *dramatis personae* change (as well as the attributes of each), but neither their actions nor functions change. From this we can draw the inference that a tale often attributes identical actions to various personages. This makes possible the study of the tale *according to the functions of its dramatis personae* (20).

In other words, within the fairytale, each of these roles is played by either a single character, or by a combination of several characters. What is important, is the function they serve within the story. This is what makes fairytales so viable for interpretation, it's not the characters themselves that are important, but the function they serve within the story. It doesn't matter if you name the villain Koschei, Lord Vasilik, or Voldemort, the function of antagonist to the hero is still served. Not much attention is paid to personality, which leaves a lot of room for speculation. Propp addresses this issue by pointing out the function of character motivation within a fairytale:

By motivations are meant both the reasons and the aims of personages which cause them to commit various acts. Motivations often add to a tale a completely distinctive, vivid coloring, but nevertheless motivations belong to the most inconstant and unstable elements of the tale...The majority of characters' acts in the middle of a tale are naturally motivated by the course of the action, and only villainy, as the first basic function of the tale, requires a certain supplementary motivation (75).

In short, motivation is driven by the plot, not the character. And it is at this point that stories become messy, and is perhaps better understood within the context of the hero's journey. Vogler introduces the reason myths and fairytale characters remain popular as follows:

The repeating characters of the world myth such as the young hero, the wise old man or woman, the shapeshifter, and the shadowy antagonist are the same as the figures who appear repeatedly in our dreams and fantasies. That's why myths and most stories constructed on the mythological model have the ring of psychological truth.

Such stories are accurate models of the workings of the human mind...they are psychologically valid, emotionally realistic even when they portray fantastic, impossible, or unreal events (5).

Are the characters in *Deal with a Dead Man* psychologically valid? Do the characters fulfill their functions within the fairytale? It employs a clear-cut villain in Lord Vasilik. Curi acts as the hero, even though it is not until later, chronologically, that he works against Lord Vasilik. Asa and Hepsiba contribute with the role of the helpers and allies – there at the right moment to lend a hand where needed. And eventually, Melet.

As the protagonist, Curi is a loner, and selfish in that he's just trying to get by. At first, he wants to fulfill his bargain with Lord Vasilik, that is all that stands in his way of leaving for, what he sees as, his freedom, and it astonishes him to discover that he wants more than that. "Before the next dawn, I'd be free. And maybe, I wouldn't be alone. I'd never contemplated the idea, but I cupped it like an orange, barely daring to breath in its bright scent..." (Reed 164).

Curi has realized that there is more to life than just his survival and own interests, even if he can't say it yet. However, by the time the princess Melet meets him, he's suffered severe failure and disappointment, and is ready to bargain with her to kill Lord Vasilik. He will have to relearn how to change a second time, repeat the ending of his hero's journey.

As for Lord Vasilik's motivations. He embodies a fear of death, hence he originally contracts Curi to find a way to keep him from ever tasting of death again. As a villain, it makes him highly motivated, which the readers see in his attempt to become ruler of the north. However, he is a villain who changes, expressing different aspects of the duality of death and life. If death is perceived as an absence of life, as Lord Vasilik initially sees it, then there is no reason not to try and extend that life by whatever means necessary. And yet, his perspective also shifts by the time Melet comes along. What is life without the possibility of death? Although it is never explicitly stated in any version of Koschei's fairytale, the immortal sorcerer seems to have lost his savor for

life. He does the same thing over and over, riding his horse over the land and returning to his empty castle.

This monotony is one of the reasons I became so fascinated by Koschei the Deathless to begin with. For the last three years of his life, my grandfather lived with my family, and by the time he reached his last year, nothing interested him anymore. Books that he would normally voraciously read sat unopened, the mere act of having to stand up and move from the couch left him asking when he'd get to go home and see his wife. (She'd been dead for twenty years, and he knew it.) When he died, I was relieved, even happy, because he was no longer really living anyway. That may sound harsh to some people, and yet...So it seems to be with the character of Lord Vasilik. He has become "Something in between...caught on the boundary, pinned to the board, unable to go back, unable to go forward" (Nix, 430). He recognizes this, Curi recognizes this. Lord Vasilik has outlived any advantages in continuing to cheat death. He tries to fix it by denying it, trying to fill that lack with the deluded fantasy that every fairytale villain seems to try; getting a kidnapped girl to fall in love with him. Curi seeks to end his undead existence, send him on into death where he belongs.

Deal with a Dead Man began as two ideas colliding within the framework of a fantasy. As I have continued writing, discovering adjustments that need to be made, my initial questions are developing in ways I did not expect, and certainly into nothing as concrete as direct answers. I have become more aware of something Stephen King said, that a story is like a fossil, and the "writer's job is to use the tools in his or her toolbox to get as much of [it] out of the ground as intact as possible" (163-64). That is what has begun to happen here. I have gone from confidently thinking I knew best, to completely changing the structure simply based on the demands of the story itself. It is a story that asks after the polarities of death, life, and what they mean, and it is

still a reimagined fairytale, but I have no doubt things will continue to change. I find myself more willing to let Curi guide me on his hero's journey, and tell the story as it should be.

Table of Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Preface.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	xviii
Part One	
Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	18
Chapter 3.....	34
Chapter 4.....	46
Chapter 5.....	58
Chapter 6.....	75
Chapter 7.....	92
Chapter 8.....	99
Chapter 9.....	113
Chapter 10.....	127
Chapter 11.....	131
Chapter 12.....	147
Chapter 13.....	151
Chapter 14.....	160
Chapter 15.....	166
Chapter 16.....	177

Part Two

Chapter 1	179
Chapter 2	186
Chapter 3	203
Chapter 4	211
Chapter 5	219
Bibliography	228
Curriculum Vita	229

Part One

Chapter 1

Blood oozed from my wrists, fat drops that splashed down at the feet of the miniature god figurines looking up at me. The pale Harvester god smiled, red eyes glinting with more than paint and wood. No one noticed, but they were all running away, scrambling in panicked retreat, looking for safety, their uniforms torn, bloody. The battle had turned into a slaughter. One soldier fell in front of me, skidding to rest against my knees, an arrow in his throat. Liquid red gurgled out of his lips, from the holes in his neck. His eyes met mine, pleading without hope. The Harvester god continued to smile.

“It’s your fault!” a voice rang out from behind me.

No, it isn’t, I wanted to say, and couldn’t. I had no voice here.

The dying man opened his mouth, reached with a hand and seized my bleeding wrist, pulling it towards his teeth.

I couldn’t move, even as my heart pounded, a scream rising up. I watched the soldier’s eyes turn black.

“They need more,” the hidden voice cried. This time, I recognized it; my father.

The dying soldier’s teeth were sharp.

The Harvester god continued to smile.

My father’s hand fell heavily on my shoulder.

“They need it all,” he growled, and cut my throat...

My whole body spasmed, gasping in winter air so hard it hurt like ice in my lungs. Everything was dark, and I pushed the woolen blanket aside, searching for the candle I’d left sitting atop my pack.

My fingers shook, barely able to hold onto the flint. It took me five tries before I managed to light the tiny wick.

It was a dream. I *knew* it was a dream but...by the Dark gods! I felt the knife, smelled the blood, the death, and the smoke of the battlefield. My father was far away, still fighting in Maxim's wars. Or maybe the Harvester had caught up with him by now; I couldn't remember when he'd die. It didn't matter either way because he had no idea where I was. I knew that.

And I knew too, with a surety I couldn't shake, that I wouldn't die today.

I held still, cupping the heat of the candle so close it almost scorched my fingertips. The knowledge settled in me like a piece of driftwood weighing on water. My breath guttered the candle's flame, brushing it against my skin. I knew a premonition when it came, how it stuck in my mind just as if it were wood caught in the bend of a stream. Normally, it didn't come with nightmares.

And that's all it was, a nightmare. The same one I'd had many times before, and it would melt away from my thoughts the longer I was awake. It always did. It had nothing to do with the here and now. The little flame swayed in my hand, and I watched its blue heart expand and contract around the wick, feeling my own heart calm.

I would not die today. The knowledge didn't dissipate with the dream, but held as steady as the candle's heat.

My teeth began chattering in the cold, breath gusting out in clouds that batted against the flame, and forced me to set the candle down to find my coat and boots. My tent was small, made of a few deer hides stitched together, so that I could only ever sit or crouch on my knees. I needed out, to get away from the cramped darkness, and to assure myself that I really was still in the town, still camped with Peytik's caravan.

I grabbed my knife and herb bag, pinched the wick of the candle, then crawled out into the frigid, pre-dawn winter morning. For a long moment, I stood there, letting my eyes adjust, and listening for anyone else who might be awake. A few funnels of smoke drifted up from the outlines of the town's wooden houses. The trampled snow created a false light on the ground, as if it already held a bit of morning sun against the dark, star-dusted night sky. My tent nestled at the back of the caravan, against the front left wheel of Hasik and Yelena's wagon, utilizing the protection it gave against winds. They tolerated it as long as I was never in the way. Other tents were set up around and underneath the haphazard wagons. It looked like everyone had tried to form a circle, mixed up their directions and settled on two misshapen rows with a large space in the middle.

No one was stirring - thank Attun, the god of night - I hadn't wakened anyone.

I headed for the town's gate and the woods. As silent as it was inside the walls, there was still a quality about the air that breathed with all the people, and let a man know he wasn't alone.

The woods that surrounded the little town of Avishki were full of pine, and I decided it would be worth cutting some of the branches. The needles and sap were good for soothing salves, as well as clearing the head. Exactly what I needed.

The gatekeeper was asleep inside his hut, and the tall, double gate wasn't barred. Not for the first time, I wondered which warlord held the surrounding territory, otherwise, Avishki wouldn't believe itself so safe. I slipped out easily.

Immediately, the air felt different, the stillness of the shadowed trees more at ease in the cold. I veered off the regular track and onto a deer trail, not losing myself, but wanting to be away from the slightest possibility of running into another human being. It didn't take long to find a patch of ideal young trees, their branches smaller than my wrists, growth thick and healthy. Setting down my bag, I surveyed the trees for just a few branches that wouldn't affect their growth. I first

peeled away several small, tender ends, putting a bunch of needles in my mouth to chew, then set to work cutting into a few larger branches. Their sharp flavor filled my mouth and throat until my every breath dragged it deeper into my body.

The premonition still lingered, like a flame that wouldn't go out, but there was no reason I should be afraid for my life. I put another bunch of needles in my mouth, then walked on to find another stand of young trees.

My last premonition had led me to Peytik's caravan six months ago. Four months before that, I'd understood how to escape from my father and Maxim's army. Each time I had known it as sure as I knew that death, the Harvester god, came for everyone. But at least those premonitions had made sense.

The sky was lightening, the tree trunks beginning to change from dead black to frosted, ash-browns. I picked a fallen log and sat down, drawing my feet up out of the snow, and watched the eastern sky fade white with dawn. The heavy stillness of the night vanished with the shadows the moment the sun slivered over the horizon, allowing me to let go of the last vestiges of the dream.

I needed to head back. Like most towns, the majority of Avishki's population were up with the sun, and I had a job to do. I slid off the log, crouched and drew a sunflower in the snow with my finger, acknowledging the Bright gods' influence in another day. Hopefully, they weren't actually watching.

At the end of the deer trail I stopped, hearing the good-natured cursing of a group of townsmen as they came through the gates on their way to cut down trees. I waited, just out of sight, for them to move, and eventually leaned against a tree and set my bag down. It took a good fifteen minutes for the group of axe wielders to stop milling around and expounding on how cold it was,

then to finally organize their sleds and shaggy horses and trudge up the road. I watched a lean squirrel climb up and down a few trees, hopelessly looking for anything edible it might have missed earlier in the season.

Metal jingled from somewhere behind me. Sound echoes differently off trees in winter, playing tricks on the ear, but it wasn't the same as the harnesses and sleds that had just rolled past. It had a harder ring to it; the chime of weapons. I turned, and thought I saw what could have been a horse and rider half hidden in the trees by the road, but then I blinked, and there was nothing there. Likely, it had just been one of the axe men trailing behind the others. Frowning, I picked up my bag, and emerged onto the road and walked to the town gate.

Avishki's gate keeper greeted me with a neutral nod, recognizing me as a member of the caravan. I nodded back politely, and hurried on. I knew his heart would fail him in seventeen years and four months.

The gates opened onto the town's central square, with the caravan camped to the side on an open area that ran along the wall. Peytik was stretching in front of the largest wagon as I crossed the square, and I swear I could hear his joints creaking. His daughter had a fire going and their pot full of melting ice from the central well.

"Where've you been?" Peytik eyed me. He was skinny, shorter than most Andish men, and always squinted like his eyes were bad.

I held up my pine branches for him to see. "Just the woods, making sure I have what I need for today."

He grunted, "Well, get going. The square's already filling up, and you were a little short in the coin yesterday."

I nodded, biting back the first thought that came to mind. Our deal was simple. I told fortunes and gave Peytik half, and he let me enjoy the anonymity and safety that traveling with a caravan provided. Lately, however, he'd begun making little comments about the money. He probably thought I was cheating him.

"I'd better not stand here and chat then," I said.

He grunted and headed off to make sure his brother wasn't oversleeping like usual.

"Don't wake Dagda," his daughter, Nadia, called after him, loud enough to wake her aunt Dagda without her father's help. "The baby kept her up over half the night." Peytik waved a hand behind him, never turning around.

She began coughing, sounding phlegmy. She and quite a few others in the caravan had run a mild sickness a few weeks back. Thankfully, I hadn't caught it, just helped provide a lot of pine and willow to be turned into teas by Anna, the healer. Everyone had recovered quickly.

Clearing her throat, Nadia held out a hard roll of bread to me. I caught her eye, then looked hastily away while taking her offering. She'd live longer than her father, but not as long as she hoped.

"He'll wake her," she said, shaking her head. "He's as loud as a rutting boar." She pushed a stray hair back under her embroidered headscarf. "Anyway, good luck today," she said pleasantly, and in a volume that didn't carry. "If you want, the water should be warm enough soon, and I can steep some of those pine boughs, save you time."

I shook my head. "Thank you, Nadia, but I'm going to hold onto this batch; dry them."

"Oh," she reached down and poked at the fire. Sparks few up. "Well, good luck today anyway. If you need anything, you know where I am. It's wash day, and mamma's being lazy." She cast a disparaging glance over her shoulder to her family's wagon.

“I should be fine,” I said, hastily. If I wasn’t careful, I’d soon know far more of her mother’s current faults than I ever wanted to. I walked away to my little tent.

“Send your spare shirt over and I’ll wash it,” Nadia called, loud enough for the whole caravan to know about my spare shirt. I found myself waving over my shoulder just as Peytik had.

There was a good space between the weaver’s stall, and the caravan’s tinker wagon that I’d claimed as mine. I spread a hide blanket across the bare, shoveled ground, and stretched a colorful blanket up between two staked poles as a wind block. Not a full tent, but enough to keep the candle from blowing out when I lit it. The set up created a modicum of privacy, which came in handy when the housewife came to ask if her husband was currently in the cow barn with her cousin, or when a farmer brought his chicken to find out if it was his mother.

I sat on the blanket with my legs crossed, arranging a large candle and bag of rune bones in front of me. I left my hat off, letting my dark hair and Mankhat features clearly show. Really, I was only half Mankhat, or some would say yellow, but it gave my fortunes a kind of exotic credibility.

Avishki was a thriving town, plenty of residents enjoying the novelties brought by the caravan as well as the goods made by their own tradesmen. In the tinker cart, Peytik’s cousin was already enjoying success, having just convinced a mother and her two daughters to purchase matching necklace charms. They bypassed me, the youngest daughter casting a hesitant glance. I returned a smile. No matter the town, there was always a combination of trepidation and curiosity permeating the air around the idea of having a fortune read. Avishki’s residents were unique only in that the same dithering dance happened every day, rather than fading as the caravan’s novelty

wore off. But then, I'd noticed a few more representations than usual of the Bright gods and sunflowers hanging in doorways and windows. Nothing of the Dark gods.

Today, it was the pig butcher who first worked up the courage to approach me. He began by casting furtive looks about while taking care of business with other stall vendors, then stalling and gossiping with his neighbor, pretending to have more business to take care of. By the time he got around to walking towards me, everyone was aware, ears straining to catch his question and my subsequent answer while manifestly not caring at all. He cleared his throat, and I offered him the obvious and only seat. He levered himself down, keeping one leg a little unbent, and rubbing it as if it were stiff. That leg would be his undoing. In about ten years, he'd slip on ice and not get back up.

"Palm, bones, or fire?" I asked, gesturing to each in turn.

"Bones," he said, dropping the required coin into the wooden box I kept beside my knee. He shifted his shoulders, glanced about, and cleared his throat again.

"What is your question, sir?" I held the bones in my open hand, their carved runes clearly visible.

His embarrassed laugh turned into another cough. I waited patiently for him to pound his chest with a fist, and spit a mucus filled blob into the grass. I wondered if he'd had the same winter sickness as the caravan.

"I asked old Grevna about it last week, but she said it was too early to tell, so..." he rubbed his leg again. "My red sow is pregnant, but I don't know which boar did it."

"You wish to know which boar is the sire?" I confirmed, relieved he wasn't asking about himself.

“And if it ain’t one of mine,” he added. “Mine were all locked in the back pens, when I add it all up, and Dima’s the only other one with pigs close by.”

I couldn’t blame old Grevna for not wanting to get involved. The neighbor was still hanging around by the vendor stalls, and I wondered if he was Dima, and just how good a neighbor he was.

Smiling, I said, “The bones will know.” Then looked the butcher directly in the eye. “I only read them.”

For a moment he seemed confused, reading them was after all, my job, but then he snorted a laugh holding up a hand in peace. “I won’t go blaming you.”

Nodding, I held the bones out between us. “Your first question: which boar sired on your sow?”

The bones landed with a dull thud onto the hide, a wild pattern, like something running away. Both of us leaned in to study them.

“Ah,” I uttered, relieved.

“Well, which one was it?” he asked, impatiently curious.

“I don’t think we’ll need to ask the next question,” I said, touching one of the runes. “It was a wild boar, owned by no one.”

“How?” he exclaimed.

Calmly, I traced the runes of a few more bones. “That I don’t know, but a wild boar can be quite determined when a female is receptive, yes?” I would not claim to be an expert in pigs, but by moving my finger over the other bones, I could mix in just enough speculation to let him walk away satisfied I’d done my job.

“Damn,” he scowled. “I better put her in the pen on the other side of the barn.” Preoccupied, he forgot to thank me as he levered himself up, and walked away, stopping long enough to inform

his neighbor of developments. The neighbor, who had to be Dima, patted him on the back and they walked away together, likely to take care of the sow and check their fences.

Suddenly, everyone's misgivings were soothed and others began to approach for their own readings.

It was my eighth reading of the morning that went wrong.

Clouds had begun to move in, blocking the sun and replacing the clear chill with the muted, heavy, almost warmth of potential snow. She was a rounded young woman with bright, dimpled cheeks and a way of walking that happily swirled her skirts. Her mother, trailing at her side, was not nearly so cheerful and muttered at the girl as they approached, one hand reaching out to touch her daughter's sleeve.

The girl laughed. "What could it hurt, mama? Ulsha said she's never had a better reading, and we all know old Grevna is going blind."

Her mother's lips pursed in annoyance, unable to argue the point. I'd met old Grevna on my first day. She hadn't allowed me to read her fortune, but I'd read her granddaughter's, who'd then reported back to the old wise woman. Whatever the granddaughter had said seemed to be satisfactory, because Grevna had paid me more than the fortune was worth and left me alone.

"Fortunes read in the morning are the clearest, blessed by the Bright gods of day," I said to the girl, noticing she wore a betrothal charm. It was a good charm, possibly old Grevna's work. The girl would live a long life, and end it comfortably in front of her fire.

She swept a hand in my direction, turning to her mother as if to say, "See?" Then she gracefully folded her skirts and knelt on the rug, plunking a few coins into the box.

"Palm and bones," she said.

“As you wish,” I agreed. “And may your future be as bright as you are.” Her smile grew, cheeks flushing a little deeper. “What is your name?” I asked.

“Mysha,” she said, extending both her hands to me.

I took them in my own, tracing the whorls and creases that played across their surface, and said nothing of what I saw.

“Do you have a particular question?” I asked.

“I’m going to be married within the month,” she burst excitedly. “Will Fritz and I have a long life? Will we be happy, and how many children?”

Letting go of her hands, I half laughed. “I can only tell you one answer without the bones. You will have a long life.”

She clapped her hands and glanced back at her mother triumphantly. Unconvinced, the older woman fixed her disapproval on me. “And will she and Fritz be happy? With children?”

“Mama, this is my fortune,” Mysha said. To me she added, “She’s worried something will go wrong.”

“The bones will tell.” I continued to smile, and did not look at her mother. Her heart would stop while playing in the garden with one of her future grandchildren. I hoped the Bright gods were watching, and would positively influence the bones.

As I had with the butcher, I held the bones out between myself and Mysha, and met her green eyes before I let them fall. “I only read them,” I said. She nodded, automatically.

The bones scattered almost to her knees and mine, a panicked pattern, indicating unexpected changes. Damn.

I leaned over the bones, drawing my fingers back and forth as though I needed a moment to decipher what they said. One thing I’d learned about fortune telling was that people didn’t

actually want to hear the truth. The other thing I'd learned was that once I saw a fortune, I found it nearly impossible to lie about it.

"You will marry," I finally said, indicating the two bones facing her. Swallowing, I fought to leave it at that. Her smile became radiant; she delightedly turned to her mother. My fingers slid to two other bones. "A man you haven't met." I clamped my mouth shut, nearly biting my tongue.

Startled, Mysha spun back to me. "What?"

Her mother stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder. I stared at the bones.

"I'm marrying Fitz," she said emphatically. "Our wedding is already set. Old Grevna said we were meant for each other." She reached up a hand to clutch at her mother's. "You read it wrong."

"I read true," I said, lifting my face from the bones to meet her devastated confusion. I always read true, whether I wanted to or not.

"No, you didn't," she shot to her feet, angry, and bewildered. Her mother took her by the arm, glaring at me as if I'd done her daughter a physical harm. Those close by began turning in our direction, curious. I didn't move.

Mysha began crying, shaking her head. Her mother reached an arm around to comfort her, and Mysha pushed away. She looked at me one more time, hatefully at the bones, then rushed across the square. Now, everyone was watching. Even the man at the gate was standing to see what was happening.

"Yellow witch," her mother snapped, and spat at me, the gobbet landing between the rune bones. "May the Dark gods eat your soul." She made a Bright sign against evil, turned, and followed her daughter. Several women gravitated to her, hissing frantic questions.

I glanced around, caught the tinker's eye. He shook his head, scanning the square. Quietly, he gestured for me to make myself scarce. I agreed with him whole heartedly, and packed up.

Of course, I couldn't go far. The caravan was camped on the green right beside the square, and I didn't think the gatekeeper would be inclined to let me go wandering outside the walls. Nadia, hands a bright red from working on laundry, saw me coming.

"I heard shouting, what's wrong?" she dropped a pair of brown stockings back into the water. "Don't tell me Nicki tried to steal a kiss from that girl again. I told him it was a bad idea."

"Bad fortune," I said, shortly. "I'm going to lie low."

"Do you need to use the wagon?" she jerked her head towards hers.

I shook my head, hiding in Peytik's wagon would come with its own set of problems. "I'll be fine."

"I'll find out what's happening," she said, leaving the laundry where it was.

I headed for my tent, not meeting anyone's eyes.

I would not die today. The assurance hit me as I wove around a wagon tongue, and I nearly stumbled over the protruding wood.

So, I'd had a bad fortune telling. It happened occasionally...but the mother had called me a witch. My mouth went a little dry. Likely, she just meant it in retaliation for hurting her daughter. By morning, they would have calmed down, gone to old Grevna for a counter reading, and chalked me up to being a fake. Then again, fortune telling was generally considered a Dark gift.

Suddenly, everyone's initial hesitation took on a more sinister light. No one had asked for their fortune until after I'd read for old Grevna, and she'd condoned my work. It might be time to consider leaving the caravan. I dropped the blanket and rug beside my tent, and crawled inside.

“Curi!”

It was Nadia, ten minutes later, and right outside my tent. I poked my head out just as she squatted down, giving me a view of more bosom than face.

“They found a body,” she said, face white. “It’s that girl’s fiancé.”

“What?”

“He was outside in the woods. They say it happened early this morning. The headman is talking with my father right now.” She bit her lip, and glanced over her shoulder. “I know you didn’t do it, but you’d better get out of here.”

For a moment, all thought blanked. Dead. Fiancé. I would not die today.

Nadia was right, I needed to leave. Now. I ducked back inside, flipped open my pack and shoved everything I owned into it. I didn’t have time to pack the tent. In less than a minute, I finished knotting the top of the pack and crawled out into the open.

“Nadia,” I swung the pack onto my back, “can you stall them?”

I could slip behind the wagons, climb the tree by the wall, and it wasn’t a bad drop on the other side. Peytik wouldn’t back me up. I knew what he’d be saying: No simple fortune teller, that one, oh no. Witch! A foreign one at that, and now he’s gone and murdered someone?!

“Done,” Nadia said and turned to head back.

She stopped. I looked up.

It was already too late. Peytik, Avishki’s headman, and four armed enforcers were already headed our way. I gripped my pack tightly. I could still run, might even make it over the wall, but they had horses.

“Never mind, Nadia,” I said.

She must not have heard me, or decided to ignore me. Her father was glaring at her, and she took a step away from me, then started wailing as loud as she could, flapping her arms and sprinting towards her father as if the world were ending.

For a split second, I stood there, as startled as everyone else by Nadia's transformation. Then, I ran.

Yelena watched me skirt around the wheels from the safety of the wagon's doorway, offering no help. I sprinted for the tree, measuring the distance to be about three wagon lengths away. More voices than Nadia's were shouting behind me.

My feet skidded in the mud-churned snow, and I nearly went down on a knee, the pack twisting against my shoulders and throwing my balance. I glanced behind. Three enforcers circled the last wagon and charged at me. I pushed upright and kept running, reached the tree and leapt up.

My hands caught a thick branch, the bark digging into my palms. I pulled my body up, arms straining in my haste. Stomach pressed against the branch, I swung one leg up, and a hand grabbed onto my dangling foot. I jerked against the weight, looking down to see one of the enforcers clinging to my ankle. He reached up with his other hand encircled my ankle, applying his full body weight. I blinked and gritted my teeth. He only had three years before a broken arm would turn septic and kill him. I looked up at the branches above me, hoping for one strong enough to grab. No luck.

My muscles burned as I desperately gripped my half-straddled branch, trying to leverage myself into a stable position and shake him off, but my lower body slipped back down. The other two enforcers had joined the one on my leg, reaching up to grab at my other leg and pull. My hold slipped.

I fell back, smashing into their bodies and reaching out my hands to drag them down with me. I caught one by his coat, another lost his balance and tumbled into the third. I struggled up, slapping their hands off, and tried to stumble away, thinking maybe I could get to the houses, and lose them in the streets. A foot stuck out of the tangle, tripping me.

I crunched down into the muddy snow, losing all the air in my lungs as the enforcers piled on top of me. A knife glinted in a gloved hand. I jerked and twisted, suddenly desperate, imagining how the sharp edge would feel across my jugular.

“Bright gods, hold him!” one of them demanded breathlessly, shoving my face into the snow. The knife disappeared. I growled as they wrenched at my shoulders. The pack straps suddenly gave way and it landed a few feet from my head. I scraped my face out of the snow and mud enough to suck in untainted air. They jerked ropes around my wrists, twisting tight enough to cut off the blood from my hands.

Then they dragged me up by my arms, and I managed to kick one of them in the knee. He cursed, and hit me across the ear in return. Mud dripped into my eyes, burning. I shook my head, blinking rapidly and spitting out mud from my teeth. That man would end his days happily in his sleep.

“Well, master, I told you. He’s not one of us.” Peytik said as he and the headman drew close. “Lucky you came when you did, or he’d have cursed us all and vanished.”

The enforcers held me still, and I quit fighting for the moment. Concentrated on being able to open my eye again.

The headman reached down and picked up my pack, opened it, and dumped the contents onto the ground. My enforcers and the headman gasped, hands flying in quick warding signs.

“Bright gods, preserve us,” the headman breathed.

Still gasping for breath, I tried not to laugh. There wasn't much in my pack; some of the pine boughs, clothes, and a few personal items. It was the charms and Harvester figurine that drew attention, having landed right on top of everything. My carving skills were rudimentary, and it would take a lot of practice before they were worth anything, or had any real power, but they weren't Bright symbols.

"I read fortunes," I said, trying not to sound defensive. "I'm no witch. Peytik just doesn't want you looking at anyone else, or the wagons."

Peytik's eyes flashed briefly in my direction. I knew he had the children employ petty theft; little trinkets that could be sold in other towns.

"He's the one that was out in the woods this morning while it was still dark, master. He told me he was collecting pine, and we all know pine can be used for Dark witching." Peytik pointed at the charms, and left off that pine was just as frequently used for Bright magics.

The headman pursed his lips, a bead of sweat gliding down his face. Another bit of snow slid into the corner of my eye, and I closed my eyes, leaning my head to the side to get it to slide the other way.

"Take him. We'll see if he's guilty," the headman said, and I heard snow crunching as he walked away.

I opened my eyes as the enforcers pushed me forward. Peytik reached down to pick up the contents of my pack, digging for the coin box. Bastard.

"Enjoy your last five years of life," I called after him, and got another slap as they marched me into the town.

It started snowing.

Chapter 2

I wouldn't die.

I kept going back to that, trying to wrap myself in the premonition's reassurance, to hide in its warmth, like a mouse burrowing in the scraps of a nest.

It didn't change the dismal prospects I now faced. From the window, I could see the town square and the erected pole in its center, hear the scratchy shifting of the straw bundles being laid against it by the townsmen.

I wouldn't die, but that didn't mean I couldn't be hurt.

The snow had finally ceased falling, and I reached out a hand to gather the piled flakes from the barred windowsill. I was thirsty. No one had offered me water for hours, and I hadn't asked. There was no point. My guilt was already set in everyone's mind, so I wasn't deserving of normal niceties. The white crystals melted in my cold-reddened palms, forming a small puddle. I bent my head to lick what moisture I could. Once the sill was clean of snow, I huddled down and pressed my back against the stone wall, pulling my limbs close to keep my body heat from escaping. I found if I sat against the wall beneath the window, the cold air rushed past me, rather than onto me. It also allowed me a view of the rest of the room.

Across from me, long wooden posts fit within the doorframe of the holding cell I occupied, leaving me exposed to the enforcer set to watch me, the one who would die in his sleep. Strung around the barred doorframe, as well as the window above me, were chains of dried sunflowers and Brighter protection charms. A precaution against whatever witching I might do to try to escape. They hadn't removed the ropes around my wrists until the charms were in place, and they surprised me when they took the rope, smeared with some of my blood, and wove it in with the charms. A spark of power blossomed, but nothing that could really stop me, or anyone.

The flower chains, I guessed, were new; they hadn't had time to crumble, and the dyed wool around the charms was still bright. Maybe old Grevna had provided them. A lamp hung from the rafter beam above the enforcer, illuminating everything in a warm gold color. He kept glancing away from me and back, seemingly conflicted between risking a curse by catching my eye, and doing his job well. Nothing graced my side of the cell except a thin, dust-filled pallet that smelled of old, sour beer and sweat. Likely, the cell was only ever used by the town drunks.

No one had spoken to me, not even Avishki's headman. No one from the caravan had come either. I'd heard Nadia's fuming voice at one point, but soon after, when I looked out the window, the caravan was gone, and the townspeople were erecting a burning pole. Apparently, I'd get no trial, and would pay for my crime before the Bright gods at dawn.

Faint wailing filled the air for a while, the dead man's family and friends mourning his loss. I wondered, briefly, who had actually killed him. Whoever they were had excellent timing.

Wrapping my worn, muddy coat more tightly about myself, I closed my eyes and began singing old ballads in my head, imagining the sunny hills depicted by the music, and pretended I was there instead.

The clatter of boots outside the cell door had me slitting my eyes open to see who had come to gawk at me.

It was not one of the townsmen, that was for certain. The man outside the bars was taller than most by at least a head, a dark cloak draping his broad frame. His beard was cut shorter than was typical for the men of the region. Metal caught the lamplight, far more metal than anyone in Avishki would carry. A warlord. Judging by the way the headman simpered behind the man's back, this warlord owned the area.

I stiffened, my stomach sinking. Instinctively, I wanted to fade into the background and not be seen. I studied the man through slit eyes, cataloguing him, waiting to see the end of all his fortunes.

The warlord's face shifted, as if slowly emerging from water, the dark tan of his skin cooling into grey, dull and...

Involuntarily, I gasped, blinked to get rid of the image and felt a fear colder than ice creep into my gut. I saw true fortunes. His...had already happened. That wasn't possible. I *knew* it wasn't possible. I looked again. Illuminated by the lamp, the warlord smiled at me, the light glinting off his teeth.

Behind him, the headman shuffled his feet, body half bent in a bow. The warlord tilted his head back and directed a question at the simpering man.

"How do you know he's a witch?" He kept his eyes on me.

The headman blinked, gestured with his hands at me as if to say, "isn't it obvious." The warlord waited for an answer. As though it took a great effort, the headman rasped out, "He told Mysha that her fiancé, Fritz, was dead. He had Dark charms on him. He was in the woods at the same time, and..." he paused, lowered his voice. "He's one of the yellow people."

"Then, your priest confirmed it?" the warlord asked.

I kept my laugh to a bare snort. Avishki's priest, the divine interpreter of the Bright gods' wills, was a drunk. Even I knew that, hence he hadn't come with the headman to arrest me. The headman shifted uncomfortably, odd noises coming out of his nose. The priest was also his brother. Which perhaps explained the town's zealotry.

"Well then" the warlord cut off any excuse the headman could have come up with, and said, "he will be marked. Have him strip."

Instinctively, I pulled my feet closer, my arms tighter, as if that would help me avoid the humiliation. No one ever explained how the Dark devils and demons marked a witch, but everyone knew they did. The Bright priests made that very clear, and so a witch would always be prone to committing malicious acts.

“I didn’t see him, what’s his name, Fritz?” I corrected the headman. “I didn’t see him dead. I only read that Mysha wouldn’t marry him. I just tell fortunes like old Grevna.”

The headman’s face turned red, eyes popping, and he shot a glance at the warlord, as if afraid he would believe me.

“Then, prove you are not a witch,” the warlord countered, lifting his chin as though challenging me.

I swallowed, and didn’t move.

Gesturing frantically, the headman had the enforcer unbolt the door and the two of them entered the cell. The warlord made room for them, then casually leaned against the doorframe, blocking it. Both the enforcer and the headman wore strings of dried sunflowers around their necks. I wondered how they’d react if I told them I could wear sunflowers too, that the Bright gods didn’t care that much about me. The warlord didn’t wear any charms at all.

“Stand up,” the headman commanded me.

I didn’t look at him. The warlord’s smile twitched in amusement.

“Stand up!” the headman demanded, voice rising. He waved at the enforcer to make me comply.

I stood before he could come close.

“Strip down,” the headman said.

I obeyed, watching the warlord. It didn't take me long, and I left it all in a pile at my feet. The cold air cut through my entire body, forcing a shudder.

"What's this?" the headman reached down before I could stop him and pulled my bag of rune bones out of my coat.

I tried to snatch them, and the enforcer caught my arm and pushed me back.

"They're mine," I tried not to growl. "Fortune bones."

Holding the bag as if it would eat him, the headman turned to the warlord. The tall man held out a hand and accepted the bag without any sign of discomfort, opened it, and let a few of the bones roll out into his palm.

"Well made," he observed, and dropped them back into the bag. He pocketed it, then returned his attention to me, seeming pleased, as if I'd made some kind of point.

"I want them back," I said.

"How dare you," the headman spun back to me, raising a hand.

The warlord stopped him. "If you are not a witch," he said.

"Arms up," the headman said. "Spread your legs."

Scowling, I slowly lifted my arms and slid my feet to shoulder width, keeping my chin raised and body straight. I was unsure if it was the lamplight, but I thought the warlord's eyes glinted a little too brightly. Another shudder ran down my spine, this time from discomfort. He wouldn't stop watching me, and I had a strange suspicion that he knew I'd seen his fortune when I first looked at him.

Roughly, the enforcer made me turn, allowing his superiors to get a good look at me from every angle, then had me lift my feet to check the soles. Once that was done, he began to back away.

The warlord stopped him, “Don’t forget to check his hair. I’ve known many a witch marked within the hairline.”

At which the enforcer used one hand to hold my neck, and used the other to pull apart my hair to see every bit of scalp. I stared at his and the headman’s well-oiled boots, comparing them to my own maggot pale toes.

Once released, I stepped back, pushing my now tangled, black hair out of my eyes. I felt the urge to say something spiteful as the enforcer grimaced, wiping his gloved hands on his trousers. I’d washed two days ago, and I hadn’t enjoyed his inspection any more than he had.

“There’s a burn mark. It’s shaped like the moon.” the headman said.

“An accident,” I said, trying not to sound defensive.

“On your knee?” the warlord queried calmly.

My attention returned to him. “It was an accident,” I repeated distinctly, “from a forger’s fire.” I wasn’t going to explain why my father had used the hot poker on me.

“And no doubt you cursed the forger,” the headman accused. “There’s scars on your wrists too.”

Automatically, I turned my arms away from their view. “Not my doing.”

“Those aren’t an accident,” the warlord observed.

“They weren’t made by a demon either,” I countered. More than the burn mark, they didn’t need to know how I got them.

“A witch’s mouth,” the enforcer muttered, touching the sunflowers around his neck.

“The Dark gods’ yellow boy,” the warlord added, as though fitting pieces together.

I scoffed, half laughing at the absurdity. “Only half yellow, but of course that’s worse.” I shot a look at the headman. “And a lot easier than actually looking for who in your little village wanted Fritz dead.”

“You’re marked. You told the caravan master when he’d die. You cursed him.” The headman’s eyes grew wider, his breathing sped up. Sweat ran down both his temples. He touched his sunflower chain, adding a quick sign against curses.

Shaking my head, I reached down for my clothing, wishing I hadn’t said anything to Peytik, that I’d been able to lie to Mysha and told her she’d marry her Fritz, have seven children, and a garden full of sunflowers. Wishes meant nothing, and neither did reason.

The enforcer shoved me back, and stood in my way.

“Let me dress,” I snapped. “You’ve all had your look.”

“A witch won’t freeze,” the headman said.

Disbelieving, I stared at him, missing my opportunity to snatch my clothing before the enforcer scooped them up.

“Hey!” I demanded angrily, reaching out to catch the trailing sleeve of my shirt. In the next instant, I staggered backwards until I hit the wall beside the window. The warlord crowded close, although I hadn’t seen him move from the doorway. There was a palpable wrongness to him that grated and crashed against my every nerve, a force firmly rooted in the Darker powers. I pressed against the icy stones, like a cornered mouse before a black eagle.

And there, bombarded by whatever sorcery made up this warlord, another premonition cut through my senses like a knife.

A moan escaped me before I could control it, and I gasped out, “If anyone is marked by Dark demons here – “

“Yes,” the warlord cut me off, voice colder than the stones digging into my shoulders. “You. As lord and protector of these lands, I will ensure you pay for what you’ve done to this town.”

I slid down the wall, wrapping my arms about my knees. Dark and Bright gods, I had nothing left. The current premonition consumed my concentration, blurring my vision. I knew, with absolute certainty, why I would not die. I would not be tied to that stake outside and made a sacrifice to the Brighter gods while everyone watched. This warlord would make sure of it. He had *planned* for it.

Suddenly, I remembered the metallic jingle I’d heard in the woods, the horse I’d glimpsed just outside the walls. The memory chimed with the premonition, perfectly in harmony. I knew who had killed Fritz.

I pressed my forehead to my knees, whispering a warding of my own.

They left me alone to shiver in my skin, and eventually I slid over to the pallet, picket it up with wrinkled nose, and molded it as best I could around my body. It helped marginally. I wished there was more snow on the sill to drink, to get rid of the sour taste in my mouth.

Closing my eyes, I returned to singing in my head; a ballad about a young soldier who left his sweetheart in the warm southern fields but promising to return. He fought for years, saw kings and gods, but nothing as beautiful as his sweetheart’s smile and the warm southern fields. Someday, I’d hoped to find out if such a place existed.

From beyond the door, I heard the well-placed thud of his boots, the chime of metal accompanying his movements. The warlord had returned. I clenched my teeth against a sudden desire to be sick, forced myself to wait for the count of five before opening my eyes to his confident

smile. The enforcer no longer sat at his post, and the outside door was shut. Deliberately, I reached for the assurance of my premonitions, clinging to it: I would not die. Whatever he wanted of me, I would *not* die.

“I have a proposition for you,” he said, as though we sat as equals preparing to make a business deal.

“Who the hell are you?” I blurted savagely.

“I have work that I believe would suite you and your *gifts*.” He ignored my question, said the word “*gifts*” as if ownership of such powers were his and he had lent them to me.

“No,” I answered, vehemently shaking my head. Whatever he had in mind, I wanted no part in it.

“I’ve made a deal with the headman,” he continued as if I’d stayed courteously mute. “Instead of burning you at the stake, he will hand you over to me. I’ve experience dealing with Dark witches, and can ensure that you harm no one else.”

Angrily, I opened my mouth to retort.

“Or,” he held up a hand with a small, gold charm on a chain, “I can tell him you prefer to burn and will use this to keep you from cursing anyone else until your bones have turned to ash.”

The pretty thing glinted in the lamplight, delicate and entirely different than the usual, half-functional, carved charms. I traced its harsh lines, feeling my entire body squirm as if it were watching me. I knew if I were to touch it, it would hurt. Badly.

“What kind of work?” I asked, reluctantly.

His smile widened; teeth very white. “The sort of things you already do; tell fortunes, make charms, and predict when a man’s life will end.”

Heat crept into my face. He knew.

“That’s all?” I asked, skeptical. I wasn’t the only one in the world who read fortunes and made charms that worked.

“You would work exclusively for me. In return, I will provide protection from,” he waved a hand toward the window and town square, “ignorance such as this. It is offensive to nature and the gods to waste talent such as yours.”

“You’re already dead,” I jabbed, finally speaking what I’d first seen in him. He was more of an offense to nature than I was. “You killed that fiancé. You knew someone would cry “witch,” and point the finger at me. What in the name of all the gods could you possibly want from me? I read fortunes, that’s all; and yours, Bright gods preserve me, has already happened.”

“There is more to life and death than most realize,” he said ignoring my outburst. “The gods, and their realms, frequently become muddled, no matter what their priests would have you believe.”

“Most people stay dead,” I countered, bitterly, fearfully.

“Most,” he agreed.

Quicker than my eye could follow, the warlord crossed the space between us, stooped to snatch my arm, and wrapped the charm’s chain around my wrist. Then he straightened to stand over me.

I jerked away, losing my hold on the pallet. An unbearable, burning pain engulfed my wrist and spread up my arm. I opened my mouth to scream and no sound came, as if the charm had wrapped about my vocal cords and paralyzed them. Horrified, I reached to rip off the chain, but my fingers slipped off the delicate gold. I could touch it, feel the smooth links, and where it touched the burning spread. I looked up at my dead tormentor.

“Which will it be, yellow boy?” he asked, patiently observing my struggle.

Could I choose? Let them burn me in the morning? Refuse the dead man's offer? I didn't want to die. I wanted to see warm lands where fruits grew most of the year, and snow didn't exist. I wanted to be left alone.

The pain was in my chest now, involuntary tears stinging my eyes. No...Forcefully, the premonitions cut as sharp as the pain: my death was not now, and it was not by fire. This warlord held my life and my fortunes. I *needed* to go with him. It was my only chance, no matter what I wanted. My premonitions had never been wrong.

Blinking and shaking, I held out my hands for release, nodded my head in acceptance.

The warlord nodded in return, crouched, and removed the charm, quickly hiding it away. The pain vanished, and my next breath huffed out in relief. I touched my wrist, expecting to feel something like blisters on the skin. There was nothing, just my cold, goose-fleshed skin, and the scrapes from the enforcers' rope.

"What is your name?" the warlord asked. He pulled out a length of rope to take the place of the charm. I didn't fight him, held my hands limp as he looped the rope over and around. He was careful of where the last ropes had bit into me, testing to be sure that his knots were secure, but not restricting. Oddly, he wore no gloves.

"Curi," I answered. "How am I to address you?"

The warlord helped me to my feet, holding my wrists steady to provide leverage. My head only came up to his chest. He wore no insignia, no symbol of his status. Another oddity I hadn't noticed before, but I'd never heard of a warlord that hadn't adopted some kind of identifier.

"I am known as Vasilik Reborn," he said, letting my hands drop. "For you, 'my lord' will suit fine."

I frowned. I'd never heard of him, although the name Vasilik was legendary, Vasilik the Conqueror having been the first warlord. To call himself reborn... How many people knew of his status with death?

"Now, before we go, tell me when the headman will die." He wrapped the leading end of the rope around his hand.

Already he put me to work. "Why?" I asked. "Are you worried you'll need to replace him soon?"

Smile unchanging, he waited patiently for me answer him.

I sighed, looking away. "Not for a good ten years. He'll catch a fever, waste away."

The dead man nodded, satisfied.

"Do I get my rune bones back?" I asked. "And clothes?"

He chuckled, producing a simple cloak and pair of thin shoes from under his own thick cloak. "I will keep your rune bones, for now," he said, draping the fabric around my shoulders and knotting the drawstring beneath my chin. I hunched, catching the edges and holding them close about me. He waited just long enough for me to shove my feet into the leather shoes, then pulled me out of the cell behind him.

It was frigid, and I wondered if I'd end up freezing to death instead of burning. I curled over like a hunchback, trying futilely to hold my body heat, and shuddering in the small wind twisting around the building. The headman stood rigidly beside Lord Vasilik's horse. A well-dressed boy and girl, a little younger than myself, stood beside him, their wrists also bound. I watched as the headman held out two lead ropes to the dead man, who took them along with my own, then mounted the big animal.

"We are paid in full," the headman said, although his tremor made the statement unsure.

“In full,” Lord Vasilik agreed. “My protection is yours, and neither I nor my horde will darken your village.”

So, these young people were offerings to keep the warlord and his followers at a distance; no wonder Avishki was so peaceful. I wondered if they’d be sacrificed to the gods, or made to join Lord Vasilik’s army. My bet was on sacrifice, as neither of them looked capable of holding a weapon.

The headman gasped in a breath, avoided looking at the two youths, and walked swiftly away, crunching over the new snow. I wondered just how much the headman knew of Lord Vasilik and his horde, or if he understood the “Reborn” moniker.

Without a word, Lord Vasilik urged his horse into motion and the lead ropes pulled taught. I fell into step beside the girl, who shot me a fearful glance and side-stepped closer to the boy. I was tempted to say something rude, such as pretending to mutter a curse, but I was too busy trying to keep my teeth clenched against chattering and keeping the cloak wrapped about my body.

The horse’s hooves thudded dully against the snow, the light from the town houses painting gold boxes to either side of our procession. Several human shaped shadows appeared framed in a few of them, the villagers watching us go. Again, I was tempted to say something, shout a curse for form’s sake, make them believe I truly was an evil Dark witch. We left by a different gate, and beyond it, the night engulfed us, the only illumination that of the snow.

I had always thought it strange that even on a cloudy night, it was easier to see when snow blanketed the ground, as if it carried its own light down from the skies when it fell. It had the feel of magic; beautiful, still, and deadly. Perhaps it was the only way for the Dark night to mimic day; steal it from the Bright gods.

Despite the leather shoes, after a short time of trudging through the snow's white crystals, I could no longer feel my feet. My hands were no better, even though I held them close to my torso. Beside me, my fellow offerings huffed in the cold air, their fur-lined boots shuffling the fresh fallen powder with each step, their gloved hands stretched before them. From what I could see of their hooded faces, they looked frightened, their pretty Andish features pale as the snow, their cheeks flushed pink with cold...no, red.

As I watched, their rosy flush darkened and glistened to blood, bubbled, and ran from their mouths, soaked into their fur collars. A hole gaped in each of their chests, hearts missing. Their faces twisted in rapt horror...

Pain jarred against my leg, and I sprawled in the snow. A branch protruded through the white ground by my feet. The rope pulled at my hands and dragged me forward, stretching my torso against the frozen ground, each crystal feeling like a tiny blade against my skin. A scream pushed passed my teeth. An instant later, the rope slackened.

"Stand up," the warlord admonished.

Bright gods, I tried, digging my elbows into the snow and curling forward like a worm, but I couldn't feel my legs, and lost my footing. I glared up at the dead man, waiting to be dragged. Without comment, he maneuvered his horse back until his black boots were above my head.

"Stand up," he commanded, reeling the leading rope upward and giving me leverage to grasp his boot and use the horse's side to steady myself. For a moment, I soaked in the warmth of the animal's furred side, trying to recapture the edges of the cloak and pull it closed. The two youths stood well to the side, staring at me distastefully.

“Like to see you do this naked,” I spat, although I chattered so much, I doubted they understood me. I didn’t look at them directly, not wanting to see their frightened faces. Their deaths were violent, and I knew it would happen tonight.

“Curi,” Lord Vasilik chided, although I wasn’t sure if he’d understood me, or just my resentful tone.

The horse shifted away, leaving me to brace myself and continue walking. I hoped it wasn’t much farther, or the dead lord would have made a pointless bargain.

My vision was blurred by the time the dim glow of firelight broke the monotony of dark trees and unforgivable snow. It took me a while to realize we walked past tents, large hide tents, with smells and sounds I knew very well; an army camp. For a moment, I was plunged back into my nightmares...the fire smoke, the clinking and flashing of metal, the guttural voices of soldiers talking, laughing, screaming, and the smell of blood and waste that no one could ever wash completely away. Thankfully, my teeth were too clamped from cold for me to gag.

Just as in the town, our passage was watched, the various groups rising from their huddles to bow to their lord and stare at what he’d brought. I blinked, making eye contact with only a few of them, and dropped my eyes before I could see any of their fortunes. Horde he’d called them, not army.

A monstrous tent loomed before us, larger than three of Avishki’s houses but together, and even in the firelight, it appeared as black as the night sky. Lord Vasilik brought us to a halt, reining in beside a staked torch. Used to the rhythm of walking, I stumbled before managing to stand still, legs braced to maintain my balance. My feet and hands were so frozen that paradoxically they had begun to tingle with warmth. I didn’t dare look at them. Slowly, I breathed through the ice crystals formed within my nose, seriously considering dropping down to my knees in the churned and

muddied snow. There was a ringing in my head, slowly growing in intensity, and the ground began to sway.

Chapter 3

Someone's hands guided me into a wave of heat where I collapsed onto a hard, wooden surface. A stool. I blinked, blinded by flashing light. A fire, contained in a large, metal brazier. Smoke funneled upward, drawing my eyes to intricately sturdy framework and a hole in the top of the tent roof. I stared at the curling grey tongues, shifting in heat distortions, thinking I saw faces.

Hands reached around my shoulders and tugged at the cloak's drawstrings. My fingers clutched the stiff fabric, seeming incapable of letting go. I couldn't open my mouth to explain the problem. The hands vanished, and a woman knelt between me and the fire.

"You can let go of the cloak now," she instructed, leaning in carefully, as if worried of frightening me. She smelled faintly of a heady spice I couldn't name. I dropped my eyes before I saw her fortune. I was so tired.

"Here," she gently put her hands over mine, squeezing just enough to warm my fingers, carefully uncurling them. It hurt. The fabric slipped away and I sucked in a breath as air hit my back. A moment later, a far warmer fabric wrapped around my shoulders.

"Is that better?" she asked earnestly, still holding my hands, then began working the knots loose from around my wrists.

The frozen rope peeled away, burning, and I kept my teeth gritted tight against any sound. Another set of much bigger hands coiled the rope, then picked up my shoes and carried them out of sight. I hadn't felt her remove the shoes and tried not to imagine what my feet looked like. I'd seen frostbite before.

I tried to nod to her, let her know that I did feel better, but couldn't seem to make any part of me move.

“Asa,” she called, looking above my head, and someone thumped down beside me. Strong arms pulled me from the stool into a hot, engulfing embrace. I couldn’t see a face, my own suddenly buried in a thick vest that smelled of horse. Not until he spoke, and I felt the rumbling vibrations in his chest, did I realize Asa was a very large man.

I squirmed feebly, instinctively conscious that he had me in a hold I wouldn’t find easy to get out of. I must have made some protesting sound, because his arms loosened, and he spoke. “I’ll not hurt you boy, but we need to get heat back into you.”

He was right, I knew it. Already, his body heat seeped into my arms and back, blissfully warm and edging towards painful as I began shivering in earnest, my body thawing. Carefully, he adjusted his hold, cradling me like I was a child, wrapping his enormous hands around mine and rubbing life back into them. My mind drifted, as if it too were thawing into exhaustion.

I thought I stood beside a field of bodies, the last crimson touch of sunlight leaving them cold and shadowed. This wasn’t my dream, or was it the very end of it? I touched my intact throat, yet couldn’t shake the feeling that I was one of the bodies. It wasn’t quite right...

Through the rising mist, a dark shape with red eyes came towards me, fixed on me. I couldn’t turn away. The eyes drew close, the darkness resolving into a man, pale as the mists twining around him. Black runes ran from his eyes, down his cheeks and across his bare arms. The Harvester God smiled, teeth sharp, and stepped over the bodies to stand directly in front of me, surveying me just as the dead warlord had. He raised a pale hand, the black runes ending at the nails, and pointed behind me.

I would not die. The thought pulled at me, and I looked where he pointed into a wall of mist. There was heat, as of a fire just out of sight. I turned back, and the god faded, still smiling.

I was not dead. Like the smoke from the brazier, the knowledge curled protectively around me, my second premonition curling around with it. There was more to come tonight...a change. I reached out in the nothing of my thoughts, touching the sure weight of the premonition, drawing a little courage. The dead warlord was not done with me, and he was important, he was part of my fortunes...

"I'm not starving," I said, holding a steaming bowl between my hands.

The woman, Hepsiba, sat beside Asa on thick fur rugs beside the brazier. They'd roused me from my thoughts, and finished bringing life back to my warming body by having me bathe in warm water heated on the brazier. My hair was still a little damp as we sat down to eat. I wrapped myself back up in a blanket, quietly luxuriating in the feel of the soft, hooded shirt, pantaloons, and thick stockings I now wore, and leaned closer to the brazier to let its heat dry my hair. My head hurt in a vague way, and I was oddly stiff. My fingers especially moved slowly to do my bidding. I realized I must have come closer to freezing than I'd thought.

Asa grinned, one blackened tooth showing among the rest. He added another scoop of meaty stew to my bowl. "I never said you were, but you're still looking grey, and you're eyeing that food like a wolf eyes a lamb." The ladle appeared childishly small in his sun-browned hand and I thought he might be even taller than the dead warlord. He was not Andish, and neither was Hepsiba.

"Speaking of wolves," I muttered aloud without thinking, then froze. I hadn't meant to say it aloud. The heat, and my own exhaustion was making me careless.

As much as I'd tried to avoid looking directly at them, I'd still seen their fortunes, thankfully, not as violently as I'd seen the two youths. Both their deaths were years from now.

There'd been more however, a gradual burgeoning of knowledge that I didn't usually experience. They were human, yet they exhibited a difference in movement, as if they were using their ears and other senses just as intensely as their vision. As I'd watched, I saw other features overlay their skin and hair. They were wolves, but Asa was also a bear, Hepsiba, a fox.

Primly, Hepsiba set a chunk of thick bread on top of the meat in my bowl, her lean face as earnest as while she'd warmed my hands. "I prefer deer to lamb," she said, and sat back.

Asa laughed; a full belly laugh that was all good humor. His shoulders shook, and Hepsiba finally gave him a shove to get him to stop.

"Well," he said, between fading chuckles, "that saves us some trouble. You know what a skin-wearer is?"

"More or less," I said to the bowl. I only knew what I'd overheard. They were people who could change their skins from human to the animals they had bested. Where such power came from, was up for debate, but most agreed skin-wearers must pay tribute to the Darker gods and were to be avoided. I could withhold judgement. At least they were alive.

"So, what are you?" Asa asked.

"Exhausted," I responded.

"We know," Asa chuckled again. "We can smell it, and you."

"That's...unfortunate," I said, shifting to hold my bowl more comfortably.

"You smell fine," Hepsiba assured, casting Asa a long-suffering look.

"There is something else mixed in," Asa breathed in through his nose. "A Darker smell. Not exactly witch, more in line with sorcery..." he let it hang, inviting me to fill in the blank.

I took a bite of bread and didn't look at him. It was heavy, malty, and stuck to my mouth. It was wonderful.

Asa opened his mouth to continue, but Hepsiba handed him his own large chunk of bread with a look that clearly said, “later.” He obliged by eating half of the bread in one bite.

Fear still sat at the base of my gut, a coiled thing that hadn’t left since I’d first seen Lord Vasilik. The premonitions soothed it only so far. Despite that, I enjoyed the taste of the bread on my tongue, the tender meat, and salty sauce. I’d only had salt a few times before. Maxim’s territory didn’t contain any salt pools, and trade was inconsistent.

There was also fruit, most of it dried berries and apples, but there was also a small, bright orange fruit I’d never seen before. I held it in my hand, feeling the bumps in its skin, inhaling the almost pine-like freshness of its scent.

“What is it?” I asked, fascinated.

“An orange.” Hepsiba scooted closer, picked up one of her own. “Here, let me show you.”

With her finger nail, she dug into the fruit, slicing the outer shell open. “Or, you can bite it,” she lifted it to her mouth and carefully peeled a patch of rough skin away. She set the piece aside.

“Some crazy people eat the skin too,” Asa interjected, watching Hepsiba’s demonstration, then he grinned at me. “I’m not crazy. She sometimes is.”

Hepsiba ignored him, and used her fingers to continue peeling away at her orange.

I mimicked her, breaking into my orange with my fingernails. A fine spray of juice burst into the air, misting over my hands. The smell was intoxicating, like sunlight in summer. I pulled the rest of the skin away, holding the membraned internal segments up to the firelight, like a little orange sun.

“And now, you savor it,” Hepsiba delicately split her juicy ball apart, and began paring away individual pieces. She gave one to Asa, and placed another in her mouth.

I followed suit, and couldn't hide my enjoyment. It was so sharp and sweet all at once. I chewed slowly, mulling the flavor around in my mouth. They both watched me, enjoying their orange, and Asa nearly laughed when I licked my fingers to finish off the sweet juice. Hepsiba kept the peels, explaining they made an aromatic tea.

"Where do they come from?" I asked, running my tongue around my mouth to catch the last tangy residue.

"These come from the south," Asa said. "Not sure if it's from Albat, or Kozaret?" He looked at Hepsiba for confirmation.

"Probably," Hepsiba answered with a shrug. "Last time the caravan stopped in, Garesh told me that Kozaret was having trouble with the peninsula, so he may have to avoid there for a while."

"But Kozaret is always having trouble with the peninsula," Asa said. "I don't think they'd know what to do with themselves if they weren't."

Hepsiba shrugged. "That's what Garesh said. I didn't interrogate him about it. He'll just have to trade more in Albat, or Touriss instead."

They were names I didn't know, but I still followed the exchange closely. South. Could Lord Vasilik's territory be so large? Was he so strong that he could pay a caravan to trade for him in other lands? Something stirred in my gut, warring with the fear; something bright like the oranges.

"How far south does Lord Vasilik's territory extend?" I asked.

"We share borders with the Purishea empire," Asa gathered up his bowl and mine.

"Who haven't tried to conquer here simply because they are too preoccupied in expanding along the coasts," Hepsiba added seriously, also handing him her bowl.

Asa nodded in agreement. “Yeah, there’s not much to want this far north, as far as they know.” He set the bowls aside on a bench and stretched, one arm coming to rest across Hepsiba’s shoulders. She leaned closer to him. “We’ll see what happens once Vasilik finishes making his own empire.”

“His own empire?” I repeated, distracted from my thoughts of warm coastlines, and where one could buy oranges.

They nodded in unison. “Just like Vasilik the Conqueror,” Hepsiba said.

“We took Maxim’s lands a few months ago,” Asa continued, then frowned. “Are you alright?”

I hadn’t meant to react, but I couldn’t help it. My morning’s nightmare suddenly returned to me. I’d been born in Lord Maxim’s army, and I knew he was one of the stronger warlords. Ruthless. The taste of the orange soured in my throat.

“I’m fine,” I said, pulling the blanket tight around me, reminding myself that I was here, and my nightmares were just that: dreams, not reality. I couldn’t stop myself from asking, “How much of his army died with him?” Maxim was not the kind to surrender.

“Well, once Maxim was dead, most were willing to join us,” Asa answered, watching me closely. Hepsiba had perked up, like a fox sensing a disturbance. “It wasn’t hard. Serving the strongest warlord seems to be the norm up here, and when you’re conquered by Vasilik Reborn...stupid not to, especially since he’ll leave you in charge once your loyal to him.”

“They won’t be loyal,” I shook my head, confused. “Maxim put down mutinies all the time...”

“They will be,” Asa cut in, adamant.

I stared, unsure what I was missing. They couldn't be that naïve. My hands gripped the blanket so hard they creaked, my thoughts crowding together incoherently.

"Lord Vasilik has ways of being sure," Hepsiba said, then she sighed. "You know the story of Vasilik the Conqueror, yes?"

I nodded, slowly.

"Of course he does. Probably better than we do," Asa added.

The warlords had been fighting over the north for as long as anyone alive could remember, and for generations of the dead as well. Vasilik the Conqueror had first brought the Andish people here, and built an empire, and apparently life was good, but it fell apart. His generals rebelled against him, but after killing him, they couldn't agree on who should rule next and so they fought between themselves. Now, their descendants, and any upstart who could take their place, continued the fight. I didn't know anyone who still believed the north could be united again.

"Then you know that the Conqueror was also a great sorcerer," Hepsiba held out her hands as if demonstrating a spell. "So is Vasilik." She let her hands drop.

"The Conqueror is meant to return," Asa continued. "Why not now, in another Vasilik?"

I'd never believed the stories about Vasilik the Conqueror returning. He was centuries dead, and I agreed that a united Andish north was just wishful thinking. Except now...

I wondered if they knew Lord Vasilik Reborn was dead.

"Is that why you follow him?" I asked.

They were both still, watching me attentively. They did not answer my question.

What warmth I'd soaked in suddenly didn't feel like enough. The question Lord Vasilik hadn't answered back in the cell resurfaced: Why, if he was a sorcerer, would he go to the trouble of acquiring me? What did he want? Since arriving, I hadn't seen him, or the two youths from

Avishki. Just Hepsiba and Asa, two skin-wearers apparently charged with taking care of me, or with keeping me occupied...

"Are you his servants, or his enforcers?" I asked, bluntly. "Were you supposed to make me feel comfortable?"

If I hadn't been watching, I would have missed their exchanged glance, the small ripple of chagrin in their expressions.

"How about this," Asa proposed, taking his arm back from Hepsiba's shoulders. "You have questions about us, we have questions about you. Let's play a game, and whoever wins, gets the last orange." He pointed at the single globe left in the bowl between us. Hepsiba shot him an irritated look, but he smiled and said, "I'll split it with you."

"What's the game?" I asked, unsure I had a choice.

"If I can guess what you are and why you seem to know so much about Maxim's army within twenty questions, I get the orange. If I don't, you get it."

"If I can guess what you do for Lord Vasilik in fewer questions, I get the orange anyway," I said.

"Fair enough," Asa agreed, with a short laugh. "But I get to start."

I shifted in the blanket. My legs were beginning to go numb. I shrugged. "Why not. I'm not going anywhere."

"True," he agreed, then leaned forward with his arms crossing his knees, intent on me. It was unnerving, as if there really was a giant bear in the room staring me down. He took a deep breath through his nose, letting it out slowly. I wondered what I did smell like, and how he could tell if he was smelling me, or all the food and the fire.

"Are you cursed?" he asked.

“No,” I shook my head. That wasn’t what I expected.

“Do you practice any of the witching arts?”

I hesitated, decided on my usual answer. “I tell fortunes. That’s all.”

“Hmm,” he pursed his lips, turned to Hepsiba. “I swear I’m picking up more than that.”

She shrugged innocently, clearly unwilling to help him out of his predicament.

“You don’t want the orange?” he asked her, feigning hurt.

“Your game,” she said. “I’m thinking he’ll beat you.”

He sighed and turned back to me. “Have you ever been insane?” he brightened.

“Depends on who you ask,” I tried not to sound bitter about that one.

“Have you ever been accused of witchcraft or sorcery?”

I didn’t answer.

“Is that why they were going to burn you in Avishki?” Hepsiba asked quietly.

My attention slid to her, wondering how she knew. I couldn’t read her expression, but I couldn’t look away. She seemed to understand. Maybe she and Asa had been involved in the murder somehow, or maybe she’d just added up my bruises, my naked state, the smell of the cell on me, and come to the correct conclusion.

“Curi has a predilection for necromancy. He knows when a man will die,” Lord Vasilik answered from behind me. I startled, jerking my head around to the back of the tent.

The dead warlord had exchanged his armor and cloak for a soft, green woolen tunic, breeches, and cloth boots. In no way did it diminish his stature, or the sense of wrongness about him. Already, my body began to tighten, as if preparing to run from a threat. Perhaps it was sorcery, something he worked to hide the fact that he was dead.

Asa and Hepsiba rose as the warlord approached. I followed their example, keeping the blanket around my shoulders, like it was an extra layer of protection against him. The skin-wearers bowed, a mere inclining of their heads and shoulders. The dead man inclined his head in return, as though they were equals.

He stopped next to me, and the sense of Darker power stirred my fear, twisting it in my gut and corrupting the food I'd eaten. Quietly, I swallowed, tightening my throat against any rebellion.

The dead man reached out a hand and placed it on my shoulder. "I now know when Avishki's headman will die, and I'm sure he knows when you will die as well."

I fought the need to slide away, felt my face turning red in the silence that followed. Apprehensively, I shifted my feet, aware of both Hepsiba and Asa staring at me.

"Mystery solved," Asa said, cutting the moment. "Knew it was something like sorcery."

"Yes," Lord Vasilik agreed, "Very talented, no proper training, and a penchant for attracting trouble." He finished the statement with a pat, as if I was already a favorite but vexing dog.

Hidden by the blanket, my fingers tightened into a fist. Trouble wouldn't have happened if he'd left me alone. I drew in a breath and held it, then turned to face him, providing a reason to pull away from his touch, and bowed deeply from the waist. "For keeping me alive, I thank you," I said, inserting as much sincerity as I was capable of.

"You will repay the favor," he assured. "I do not acquire worthless things."

I would not die tonight. I silently repeated it. Asa and Hepsiba exchanged another look, and I wondered if they had been "acquired" as well. I caught Hepsiba's eye. She smiled, giving me an infinitesimal nod, and again I felt she understood.

"I will not disappoint," I promised. "I always pay my debts."

“Good,” Lord Vasilik said, again placing a hand on my shoulder, his hand applying pressure. “Come,” he directed me back the way he’d entered.

I took a few steps, then stopped, turning back to my caretakers. “You can have the orange,” I said to Asa. “I think you won.”

Asa shook his head. “Unfair advantage. I can’t win when the answer is given away. You eat it later, tell me if it tastes as good the second time.”

“Ah, my apologies, Asa,” Lord Vasilik said. “I hadn’t realized, but I’m sure you and Hepsiba will have plenty of chances to engage Curi in more games.”

I didn’t bother to mention that I doubted I’d want to eat anything for a long time after whatever the dead man wanted with me tonight, and I didn’t know how to respond to their exchange, or how to acknowledge Asa’s kindness. My gut was roiling, so I ducked my head and continued walking in the direction I’d been told. Hepsiba and Asa remained where they were, watching us go.

Chapter 4

He parted a flap in the tent wall to reveal a slice of darkness. I paused, the light appeared to stop dead at the flap, a delineating line between the firelight and the dead man's territory. Thinking of my premonitions, I stepped forward, ducking to clear the trailing end of the flap, Lord Vasilik at my back.

The flap fell and we were left in near complete darkness, the barest line of light lining the way we'd come. I stopped moving, and as he came up beside me, his dead eyes shone with a reflective, silver-green of a predator at night. All the warmth of the brazier, the conversation, the food drained away, and it took all my self-control not to try and bolt passed him and take my chances in the frozen night.

He must have felt my body's slight quiver, and read my sudden instinctive need to run, for he pushed me forward with a hand in my back.

"Before you make yourself at home," he said, "we must formalize our bargain."

"My word isn't enough?" I wasn't surprised, but somehow, I had secretly hoped that I wouldn't have to be permanently attach to him.

"Oh, I know you'll keep your word." His hand slid to my elbow, applying pressure. "However, it is always wise to keep with tradition when bringing someone new under your roof."

"With sorcery?" I queried. Once, I'd watched a soldier in my father's regiment make a deal with a traveling wise woman to take a message to his left behind lover. They shook hands on it, and I remember the infinitesimal tendril of power that wove between their fingers and up their wrists to settle like bracelets. It was a month later that the tendril left his hand, faded like smoke into the air, and the soldier mentioned that he was sure his lover had received his message. I knew

the soldier didn't have any power of his own, at least no more than anyone else by virtue of simply living. I also knew when he died a week later.

"Yes," he said, continuing to push me forward until I stood in, I presumed, the middle of the room, then he dropped my elbow. I heard the snick of a flint striking, saw a spark snap into being. Light flared, forcing me to blink away residual images and shadows.

I faced a table, a well-made, heavy table and chair. To my right was a large, carved bedframe, half hidden by a screen. It twisted and tangled in the likeness of two oak trees. To me, they seemed to be in pain. The table and chair were similarly carved.

While the light did not reach the edges of the room, this was obviously his private space. Beneath my feet, the rugs and furs across the floor were colorful, patterned in the Andish style. Situated by the bed, the light reflected off his armor hung on a rack beside a large chest. Behind the bed, I could barely make out another screen with some kind of lacquered pattern on it. Despite the extravagance of the actual furniture, the room was very spare for its apparent size. Nothing was unneeded.

Having grown up running messages between my father and his superiors, I knew Maxim's captains and generals were prone to showing their rank in excess. Little trinkets and souvenirs would adorn their tents, decorative armor for occasions, even pets from conquered territories, or bought from passing caravans. The dead man had none of those things.

Well, unless I was now the pet.

Lord Vasilik moved to stand behind the table, squarely before me, allowing the light to fall fully across his upper body. His eyes still shone nocturnal bright, and I realized the lamplight must be for my benefit. Could he see in the dark? I shifted uncomfortably.

“Now,” he spread his arms out, palms turned upward towards me, as if he were about to make some kind of confession. “Tell me how I died.”

I knew he would ask, that he would want a demonstration of my gifts in action. No doubt he wanted to be sure that I was worth his trouble. Back in Avishki, I had only seen that he was currently dead, but not the how. I drew in a breath to steady myself, closed my eyes for a moment, then simply stared at Lord Vasilik.

As a small boy, I’d never been able to command my ability to see fortunes, but I learned very quickly that it was best not to advertise what I knew. I remembered distinctly the first time I saw more than one at once. My father’s regiment was gathering to march, and some of them looked grey and bloody, while others were whole and vital. I’d turned away, thinking they were dead and walking around, but when I looked back, they were all alive. Sometimes it would come the moment I met someone’s eyes, sometimes it took minutes or even hours, but it always came. I could never stop the sudden flashes of understanding, or how much I saw. Sometimes, I could only tell the exact minute of a death, sometimes I’d understand what circumstances led them to their death, and sometimes I only knew vaguely that it would happen in the years to come. Thank all the Bright and Dark gods that I only ever saw a death once, but once was enough for the knowledge to become indelibly fixed.

As I’d grown older, I’d learned that I could see a death more than once, if I desperately needed to. I’d only done so twice. Why would I want to? But all I had to do was look and relax my eyes, like viewing fish under the surface of an opaque pond. Eventually, the murk settled and I could see what was below the surface.

The murk around Lord Vasilik did not take long to settle. He stood before me in a dark green tunic that fell to his knees, embroidered on the hem and collar with Andish ivy, dead and

smiling. Underneath, rising as if regaining his vitality, the once living Lord Vasilik's brighter green and grey uniform emerged.

The two images overlay, the old uniform's colors and textures adapting themselves to fit around his present body. Armor and accents of blue and yellow overpowered the current dark, dead greens. The armor was strange, a dark, muted charcoal color, appearing oddly soft for a metal. Then, there was red. On his left side, dark stains spread, the fabric glistened, saturated in the liquid, and it stuck to his skin. There was a puncture, between two plates of the strange metal meant to keep him safe. The blood ran down, soaking into the breeches, so much red that I knew it was his death wound. I lifted my eyes, and stopped at his chest. Another wound opened, a hole just beneath the ribs. His heart had been removed.

"He betrayed you," I said, the knowledge suddenly there, not in words or images, just there as if I'd witnessed his death myself, been part of it. "Your friend was jealous that you were going to be promoted, but he said he wanted to celebrate. Everyone else had gone to bed, and he convinced you to leave, wanting to talk privately. Then he stabbed you." My fingers wandered down to my side. "He said your blood was not as pure as his, and you didn't deserve to become more than he. Then he left you to die."

My breath caught for a moment, as though I too were in pain. Vasilik had reached out for his murderer, his friend, had stumbled over the roots of a large oak. The pain had jarred a cry from him, and his murderer had watched, just out of reach, until he no longer had the ability to voice any resistance. Only then had his friend walked away.

"He didn't know," I continued in a whisper, "that a feeder was in the area, had been following in the wake of the battles and eating off the dying. It heard you and your friend, and

waited. The feeder said you could be his soldier instead, and you agreed so you could go after your friend...”

I almost thought I saw the friend’s death, and closed my eyes, drawing in slow measured breaths. Anger didn’t begin to describe the emotion Vasilik had felt. There was too much fear in it, too much vengeance; a writhing mass of bitterness. It was...unclean. He had refused to move on, to take the journey death offered. My hand moved up to my chest. The feeder had cut out Vasilik’s heart while working an insidious sorcery, and I watched it burrow inside him like worms, trapping him in life.

“That was over three hundred years ago,” I finished. I drew in another breath, his death tangling with my own perceptions of reality. It felt akin to removing my face from ice water and having to wait for it to dry, everything just a little to skewed and sensitive. Finally, after more deep breaths, I opened my eyes, but did not lift them higher than the table. I couldn’t look at him yet.

“Can you see where?” he asked, almost excited.

“No,” I shook my head. “There was a tree, and I think water, but nothing more.”

“And what of my current existence? Do you see anything of when it will end?”

Although he asked the question mildly enough, I heard the delicate thread of curiosity. Everyone wondered when their fortunes would catch up to them, when the Harvester god would come for them. One of Maxim’s priests had tried to force me to tell him his fortune, then to kneel before the statue of the Harvester and beg to be given more time. My father had threatened that if I ever mentioned when he’d die, then he’d kill me himself. And I had never seen my own death.

“No,” I said truthfully, wondering if he would believe me.

His shoulders fell ever so slightly, but he waved a hand as though dismissing his disappointment. “No matter. You will become stronger. I have not met a necromancer with your gifts since I was alive.”

That was the second time he’d called me necromancer. It was a form of malevolent sorcery, always associated with Dark demons and devils, and not even those who worshiped the Dark gods liked to speak of it. I was a fortune teller, and it was only my Mankhat blood and everyone’s stupidity that made them assume I was anything more. I didn’t like that he expected me to develop my apparent affinity. Being considered a witch was bad enough.

“So, is that why I’m here?” I asked. “You want to know if you’ll die again?”

“Convenient as that knowledge would be, no.”

“Then, you don’t have any other witches or sorcerers around? Even if you are the great Vasilik Reborn, I’ve never heard of a warlord that didn’t surround himself with powerful people.”

“I think,” he said, “I begin to see how you manage to get yourself in trouble.”

I took a step back, dropping my eyes.

“Forgive me,” I said.

“You’ll learn.”

Silently, I studied the wood grain of the table’s edge, how it ran perfectly with the movement of the carved tree branches. A black knot curled between two leaves, looking like a gaping mouth and two eyes. If I stared without blinking, it appeared to move. I folded my arms, realized that while watching his death, I’d dropped the blanket and it lay in a puddle behind me.

He set two shallow bowls and a slim knife in the middle of the table, then sat down. The chair curved up and around him, perfectly structured to fit his height and shoulders. All he needed was a crown.

“What is your name?” he asked.

“Curi,” I replied.

His lip twitched. I wasn’t lying.

“I was never acknowledged,” I admitted. Even though everyone had known who my father was, he would never admit it.

He nodded. “And your age?”

I shrugged. “Sixteen, more or less. I’ve never kept track.”

“I see,” he tilted his head. “I did not think you quite old enough to be a man. Was your father or mother Mankhat?”

“Mother,” I said, heat creeping into my face.

“Then the necromancy comes through her line?”

“Witch,” I corrected. “She only ever read the bones.”

He shook his head. “No. Your rune bones came from her, yes? She may have only shown you witchcraft, but no mere witch made those bones.”

“May I have them back?” I asked.

“Later,” he said. “Did your father exhibit any witchcraft or sorcery?”

I shook my head. He’d just used those of us who did.

“Well then,” he said, “this will be much simpler than I’d planned for. Hold out your hand.”

I hesitated, looking at his pale fingers stretched out across the space between us.

“Does it matter which hand?” I asked.

He smiled knowingly. “Not for this. It is not witchcraft.”

“What will it do?”

“Nothing adverse,” he assured. “It is a ritual exchange of blood. As lord, I take responsibility for your wellbeing, and as a member of my house, you accept your place and responsibilities. No one will give you trouble, as we agreed in Avishki.”

I frowned. Sealing a contract between a warlord and those who served him with a touch of magic was common, just as between that soldier and the traveling witch. Using blood sorcery was not. Besides, if such a contract were broken...

I swallowed, suddenly feeling as cold as if I were once again outside. I wanted to deny him, premonition be damned. Death couldn't be worse than this unknown.

“You agreed,” the dead man reminded stonily.

“Exactly what responsibilities am I agreeing to?” I asked. “I think I have the right to know.”

The darkness behind him seemed to flicker and deepen. His eyes still reflecting in a way they shouldn't. I did not blink, tried not to see into the condensing shadows that seemed to grow, creating more shadows of their own.

And then he broke eye contact, scoffing in amusement. “I suppose you have a point.” He stood, the candle's light seeming brighter again. “But be careful, Curi. I am not always so patient.”

I jerked my head in a nod.

“Come,” he walked into the dark, right side of the room.

I followed, imagining the varied horrors lurking just out of sight. Another candle flared to life.

An enormous piece of pale, soft leather was spread across the ground rugs and anchored with nails driven through each of the four corners. Whatever animal it had come from was huge, spreading the width of at least two men if their arms and legs were pulled wide.

Dyed and stitched into the leather was a diagram of three circles. The central circle was whole and stitched in green, the next circle in dark blue, and the third in yellow. The outer two circles were dissected by the four red cardinal lines, and a five-pointed star, stitched in black, overlay it all. Runes circled the outer edge.

I flinched. The workmanship was beautiful, but I knew the implications of a casting circle, designed to encompass the three realms and all the world had to offer. It was used to channel power, to entrap, to sacrifice or transcend, all dependent on the user's intentions.

For a moment, all I could see was my own blood scrawled in symbols within a similar circle made of curled wooden hoops, my father dispassionately watching as the priest cut into me and forced me to look into the prayer fire. Felt the hot edge of the knife held against my jugular, because I'd refused to petition the Harvester God as they wanted me to.

"Why a star?" I asked. I had only ever seen circles with the directional lines.

"It is the body," he said. "This is a perfect circle."

It was another layer of power, and the stains of candle wax at each of the various points indicated the circle was used frequently.

"You perform your own spells." My voice was dry, wavering. I shoved my memories back down where they belonged. "If all you're looking for is power, I'm no better than any other witch. I don't know how to work this kind of power."

He came and stood right next to me. "Witches work within nature, bending and manipulating the rules that govern and divide this and the other realms. Sorcery breaks them and makes its own rules. It is your necromancy, the sorcery of life and death, that I expect you to use. Your ignorance is to my advantage. You have no idea what is, or is not, possible.

“But you are correct. If all I needed was power, anyone would do, including you.” He let that hang until I acknowledged it by shifting a little away from him. “My sorcery can only take me so far, now that I stand on the wrong side of death.”

I shifted another step away, traced the patterns created by the different parts of the circle.

“You will do what I cannot,” he continued. “You will use your necromancy to ensure I never return to death again.”

“Feeders are already dead,” I stated the obvious. “You’ve already slipped the Harvester god’s net.”

“I have crossed the line,” he said. “But my body can still be destroyed, my soul left to face the Harvester and account for my stolen time. You will make sure that never happens.”

“And if I can’t do it?” I asked.

He smiled. “You are still powerful, full of life, and I am a feeder.”

The Avishki boy and girl flashed across my mind. Premonitions be damned, I didn’t want to die like that. Curtly, I turned and walked back to the table.

“At the end of this,” I forced out, “once I fulfill our bargain, I am free to leave and go where ever I wish. No attachment to you.”

His smile widened, and he picked up the knife from the table.

“That is the nature of bargains,” he said, nodding.

I thrust out a hand, stretching it across the table into his waiting one. He aligned my forearm with one of the shallow bowls, then cut fast and deep. It took a moment for the blood to well up and begin to drip. He held my hand steady, tightening his grip as my fingers began trembling of their own volition.

He did not fill the bowl, and efficiently turned my arm up and wrapped the cut. It throbbed in time with my escalated heartbeat. I kept the arm turned up, held it close to my body.

The dead man lifted his own arm and made an identical cut, letting it drip into the other bowl. It was as red as mine, but somehow it appeared to catch less of the light.

Setting the knife down, he deftly picked up the bowl of his blood and held it out to me. I took it, stared at the liquid. He picked up the bowl of my blood.

“We drink,” he said, lifting his bowl to his mouth.

I took a deep breath and held it tightly, opened my mouth and poured his lifeless blood onto my tongue and down my throat.

Blood is an odd taste, like the smell of metal buckles and salt combined with the cloying sweetness of warm meat. Anyone who’d bitten their lip knew the flavor.

His blood was like nothing I’d tasted before.

There was no warmth, just the sweetness that of decay. It was dead blood. Then the sorcery hit me, like drinking cold water that was boiling hot at the same time. It slid down my throat and into my gut, and didn’t settle, as if it were alive: a strange, twisted thing of creeping vines tangling around a tree in a chokehold while at once helping it remain upright.

I swallowed quickly, using speed to keep myself from gagging, then dropped the bowl back onto the table. I pressed a hand to my mouth.

Like a spark from a flint, my premonition flared in satisfaction, then dissipated into nothing. My head pounded, and I realized I was on my knees, forehead and injured arm braced against the edge of the table. I was strangely grateful that the bearskin rug beneath the table did not still have the head attached.

“Curi,” the dead man called.

I lifted my head to his reflective eyes and felt a sensation like a pin slipping into place and snicking closed.

“And it is done,” he said. Satisfied.

Chapter 5

There would be a battle. I knew it, and jerked awake with the taste of pain and insanity in my mouth, men's screams buzzing like wasps in my ears. Blinking in the dim tent, I sat up pulling the blankets around me.

This dream was exactly what I'd been waiting for.

It had been a month since I'd sealed my bargain with Lord Vasilik, and in that time I'd neither seen nor accomplished anything related to fulfilling it. Now he was invading Anset-de's territory. Along with Maxim and Igan, Anset-de was the third most notorious warlord, always traveling with his army of horsemen, appearing and disappearing as if at random. Lord Vasilik had resorted to sorcery to find his rival, and now we camped no more than a few miles from Anset-de and his army. Messages had been sent, and the two warlords would meet tonight. I'd tried to divine what the outcome would be using my rune bones, knowing Lord Vasilik was not looking for a fight, and instead hoped to convince Anset-de, by virtue of his grandiose vision of a united north, to join him.

The bones told me nothing, and it irritated me, even made me wonder if some other power blocked me. But there was no real indication of such.

Now, this dream foretold death.

I should get up and inform Lord Vasilik before Anset-de arrived, but the dream was still strong enough my vision blurred, and I groaned, curling up with my arms around my knees. I felt I'd been smacked in the forehead with a club. It was worrisome, as even my nightmares never hit me this strong. This dream was different.

Drawing in a deep breath through my nose, I let it out through my mouth, then did it again, calming my pulse. The pounding in my head beat more slowly. Now was the time to look, while

the dream was fresh, and try and parse any meanings out of it before the details faded. I needed to be sure of what it meant. I closed my eyes.

Screaming; the high-pitched cries of men who can do nothing to save themselves. Their voices mingled with those of horses, squealing as they bled out from arrows, swords, teeth, and claws. Lord Vasilik's horde was very effective. Light from the waxing moon gave a silver overlay to the dark blood spreading across the snow.

I saw my own hand held out, a large, silver medallion clenched flat against my palm, cold and somehow eager. The lines of the witch circles swirled across its surface, like outlines of the moonlight. Lord Vasilik raised his hand, the silver suddenly held in his fist, and I looked down to see that mine was empty. Before him knelt Anset-de, his arms spread out to either side, like a supplicant before a god's altar. The dead man opened his mouth, words spiraling into the air to wrap around the other warlord, then outward across the soaked battlefield.

"Interesting choice," a voice from somewhere in the dark said. I couldn't tell who the speaker referred to.

Anset-de looked at me as if I had spoken, eyes yellow and inhuman, and an intolerable, fearful rage hit me like a thrown spear. I curled in pain, and the dream abruptly ended, as though I truly had been struck, then shoved out of it.

The certainty that this was in the near future pressed about me, insisting that I pay attention. I knew Anset-de would die, and that Lord Vasilik would do it. I knew it was unalterable. I thought I recognized the voice, but couldn't place it. And that rage...it hadn't come from Anset-de.

Dark gods, the dead man was not going to be happy when I told him, and our bargain meant I'd have to tell him.

At that moment, Hepsiba pushed her way into the room. My thoughts scattered.

“Oh, good, you’re awake,” she said. Light blossomed from the overhead lamp, and I buried my eyes in my knees.

“Ow,” I muttered.

“They’re already on their way,” she continued. “Lord Vasilik is waiting for them, and he’s asking for you. Asa just rode out to meet them.”

That made me look up, begin searching for my boots and overcoat. I’d slept longer than I’d intended.

“Curi, what’s wrong?” Hepsiba asked, frowning as she watched my stilted movements.

“Bad headache,” I said. “Had a dream.”

“I’ve got something for that,” she said, kneeling to help me with the ties on my boots. “But you’ve got to come now.”

Embarrassed, I watched her undo my fumbled job, and relace the cords in half the time. She caught my eye, and rolled her eyes. “I just helped Asa look presentable too. Impressions can change outcomes, especially for something like this, and you’re both hopeless. Now, come on, let’s get you awake.”

Coat in hand, I crawled to my feet, and followed her. “Please tell me whatever you’ve got is strong, and warm.”

Within ten minutes, I was standing at the entrance of the formal receiving tent, my tongue a little scalded, and headache receding. Hepsiba was a wonder.

I positioned myself three steps behind and to the left of Lord Vasilik, who stood squarely before the entrance, visible for all to see and facing Anset-de’s camp. Out of habit, I settled into the approved stance of a message runner, hands at my thighs and feet in line with my shoulders.

On the right stood the dead man's generals, the seven men who answered only to him and kept his horde in line. They believed in his vision of a united Andish north, although at least two of them seemed more motivated by the promise of power at the end of it all. They also backed his claims of being Vasilik Reborn. I'd told him when each of them would die, and none were soon.

Before us stretched a wide thoroughfare between the tents of the many mercenaries, soldiers, and others that made up the horde. Most of them sat around cook fires, eating the evening's first meal, while others stood waiting and watching. Everyone was turned towards the long plains sloping away from the low hills, and the dark smear that was Anset-de's army. Smoke from the many campfires twined up into the pale sky on all sides like a ghostly forest trying to escape from their roots.

There was still a good amount of daylight left, winter weak though it was, but the tents already cast long shadows across most of the camp. Lord Vasilik stood on the bare edges of the shade, as if daring the light to touch him. He never did stand in sunlight, unless hooded and cloaked, and it made me wonder, privately, what his relation to the sun was. Supposedly, feeders couldn't abide it. Then again, what did I know?

Snow crystals blew about in the wind; bright, fragmented orange, yellow, and blue ribbons that stung like pins against my cheeks. I pulled my hood tighter, and turned to catch the brunt of it from the side.

I needed to tell him my dream.

"My lord," I said, stepping closer.

He lifted a hand, two fingers slicing the air for silence, all his attention focused on Anset-de's entrance.

We heard them coming up the hill, the echoing jingle of the horsemen's tac, and more men stood from their fires to watch the warlord and his entourage pass.

I tried again, "My lord..."

"Your place, witch," he hissed, not looking at me. "Now."

"I had a dream," I persisted.

General Gostle twitched his head in my direction, hand tightening on the knife at his side. He'd once served Lord Maxim, and I'd taken care to avoid him. Not that he would have known me, but I knew his reputation. I also knew he'd die in a bath, choking on a chicken bone. Lord Vasilik didn't take his eyes from the approaching men, but his mouth thinned. I couldn't tell if he were considering what I'd said, or just disapproved of my insistence.

"Take your place." There was no compromise in the command.

I obeyed, hoping what I knew would keep until I could recite it to him privately.

There were five of them, and they rode in pairs. Anset-de kept his horse abreast of Asa and his giant of a mount, his men following behind. The horde made no sound, leaving the wind to carry the seemingly loud stamping shuffle of hooves in snow, and the clicks of metal in harnesses. A banner whipped and snapped sharply. One of the horses snorted, sidestepping with nerves. The rider skillfully controlled his animal, but he too cast quick glances around him, particularly as he passed a group of men covered in tattoos that the muscles and bones hidden beneath their skin. I didn't blame him. The painted men were a vicious mercenary tribe.

He needn't have worried about them. As I watched, a dark arrow pushed through the back of his skull and out his eye socket, the bloody orb falling away from him. He had three days left.

I turned my attention to Anset-de, wanting the visual confirmation of what I'd dreamed. He rode tall and easy on his shaggy steed, the head and hide of a black wolf covering his dark hair

and falling down his back. He did not turn his head, or cast his eye anywhere but on Lord Vasilik. Gold glinted pale in his ears and around his neck, some of it shaped as Brighter charms. I could tell he had more hidden beneath his soft leathers, and wondered if he normally wore so many, or if they were to ward against Lord Vasilik's sorcery.

I didn't see his death.

Slowly, I blinked, then stared at the warlord, waiting for his fortune to emerge as it had with Lord Vasilik. A pressure grew behind my eyes, different from the headache. All I saw was a proud, dark bearded man, skillfully riding into his enemy's camp. I bit my scalded tongue. Perhaps I still wasn't as awake as I should be and I needed more time, so I turned my attention to the men behind him.

Their deaths came in a sudden flash, causing me to surreptitiously reach a hand behind my back to catch hold of the entrance pole to steady myself. It was like the very world tilted away, leaving me to scramble to find solid footing. One would be beheaded, caught by an ax, and I watched it bounce away behind his horse's hind hooves. The other two were ripped apart. I glanced up to the orange dusted sky for a moment to banish their mutilated flesh from my vision. Every one of the men was a battle death, and every one of them in three days. I had no doubt they were related to my dream.

They were nearly level with us. Anset-de reined in at the same time as Asa, then casually dismounted, one hand lingering on his mount's neck as he surveyed his welcome party. He appeared unimpressed, although his free hand brushed one of the charms hanging around his neck. I was glad he merely glanced at me. As though some mutual signal passed between them, the warlords bowed to one another.

One hand still touching the pole, I let my eyes relax, trying again to see Anset-de's fortune. It would not come, the pressure behind my eyes increased, and it felt almost as if something blocked me. No charms, Bright or Dark, should be able to do that. My seeing was entirely different from reading bones. Strangely, I found myself staring at the wolf's head and skin he wore. This close, I could see the hide of the animal's face had been skillfully removed from the skull and reshaped to rest upon Anset-de's head as if it grew from his own black hair; a second face sprouting from his forehead. My grip on the tent pole tightened.

"Welcome, Lord Anset-de," Lord Vasilik said. "It's good we finally meet."

"Your man was persistent," Anset-de responded, his voice oddly quiet. "Had he not been yours, I would have killed him."

Lord Vasilik laughed, "Then, I admire your prudence."

The other riders dismounted, scowling, and casting wary glances at Lord Vasilik's generals. Asa extended a hand to take the reins of Anset-de's mount, and the man who'd lose an eye instantly protested, one hand resting on his knife.

Anset-de quickly held out a hand. "We are guests. We were promised no harm."

"Your men are welcome to remain with your horses, or join us as you see fit," Lord Vasilik gestured for Asa to back away.

With a few more gestures, Anset-de's men left their horses in the hands of the one who'd be beheaded. He eyed Asa, who showed him a pair of crossed poles where he could tie them beside his own animal. The man's fingers slid down to his belt to tap a charm he wore. I recognized it as a warding, and a harsh one, which made me wonder if he could tell what Asa was.

My headache was coming back.

The matter of horses settled, the two warlords entered the tent, everyone else trailing in order of rank. Asa and I came last. The heat from the two giant braziers gracing the room felt like a kiln, and I instantly began sweating in my coat. I followed Asa to the back of the room, again taking a position behind and to the left of Lord Vasilik. A large round rug spread across the middle of the floor, and the two warlords sat on either end facing one another, while their men filled the space between them. Every man eyed each other across the rug, beads of sweat showing across their foreheads and trailing into beards. Only Vasilik seemed untouched, back straight, furred collar spreading across his shoulders. At least I could unbutton my coat a little and let air touch my neck.

“Please,” Lord Vasilik said, and gestured to a large tray of breads and herbed oil set on the rug. “Be at home.”

None of Anset-de’s men moved to touch the offered food. Anset-de watched his rival coolly.

Lord Vasilik smiled and gestured to his generals, all of whom leaned forward and took slices of the bread, dipping them generously into the oil and lifted it to their mouths. Silently, they bit and chewed. All the while, Anset-de watched the dead man without expression. Lord Vasilik gestured again to the bread, “I offer hospitality. We are here to speak peacefully, are we not?”

All movement ceased, waiting for Anset-de’s response to the near insult.

“There was no need for that,” he said, taking his own slice of bread and biting into it.

Given permission, his horsemen joined him. The generals took more for themselves, and while everyone behaved civilly, passing the oil and salt across the aisle, no one spoke.

Discreetly, I kept my attention on Anset-de, trying to read his fortune, and feeling as though I kept running into a wall. The smell of sweat and damp furs began to permeate the heat, creating a musty, claustrophobic smell that clung to my throat. I swallowed, trying not to cough.

“Now,” Lord Vasilik shifted ever so slightly forward, now that the bread was nearly gone. “Shall we get down to business?”

I didn’t listen carefully to what was said. I already knew the basics. Lord Vasilik expounded on the benefits Anset-de could expect when they joined their forces: more land, and more wealth than Anset-de had ever dreamed possible. They could not fail, not with Anset-de’s prowess and Vasilik’s sorcery. They would rebuild the north as it was meant to be, a prosperous empire, envied by even the gods, just as it was in Vasilik the Conqueror’s time.

Anset-de did not move, only kept his eyes on Lord Vasilik. His men were less stoic, the heat getting to them, but I could see some of them transitioning from skeptical to considering.

Blocking out everything but the quiet warlord, I pushed against the headache, refusing to blink. My eyes watered, vision swimming. The wolf’s hide shimmered sleek in the brazier’s light, yellow reflecting off the polished stones placed in the empty eye sockets. The gold of Anset-de’s many charms melted together into one solid streak of light down his chest. The wolf grew, lengthening, spreading like a shadow unaffected by the brazier’s light...like it was alive. I blinked, then looked at him again.

Anset-de laughed. “You truly believe you are Vasilik the Conqueror reborn?”

“If you mean that I believe I am actually his reincarnation, then no,” Lord Vasilik said, shaking his head. “I bear his name, and I am a powerful sorcerer.” He paused, allowing himself a small chuckle. “I found you, did I not?”

Anset-de narrowed his eyes, but he acknowledged Lord Vasilik’s claim with a nod.

“My sorcery tells me the time is right. No doubt your own witches and sorcerers have told you things are about to change, the equilibrium between the Bright and Dark gods is shifting.” He held out his hands, as though presenting himself to a judge. “My bloodline remembers how Vasilik

conquered the Ancients, and how he established the Andish empire. The old tales do not lie. That empire can, and will, be reestablished. I will do it.”

Anset-de’s teeth flashed yellow, his moist tongue clicking against them as he considered Lord Vasilik. The wolf’s head bobbed with his shaking head, the shadows moving as he did. I felt it agreed with him and watched the light spiral in the skin’s stone eyes. I closed my eyes against the disconcerting images.

“Do the Bright gods sanction you then, as they did the Conqueror? Or was it the Darker gods who gave you the sorcery necessary to conquer Maxim’s lands?” Anset-de waved a hand around the room. “I see no gold, no charms, nor likenesses to the Bright day, so what proof can you give me? What can I hold in my hand to say, ‘Yes, he is the Reborn spoken of in legend. See here, he can return us to our glory!’”

This time, Lord Vasilik laughed, nodding, and acknowledging Anset-de’s point.

General Gostle cleared his throat. “I was with Lord Maxim, and it was not with Dark power that he was defeated...”

Dark gods, the room really was hot; sticky, summer hot, and the wolf’s pelt shone brass bright. Sweat trickled down my spine, itching where I couldn’t easily reach. I still couldn’t see Anset-de’s death.

I watched him listening to Gostle, then shake his head, pointing at his hand for solid, tangible proof. The wolf’s stone eyes took in more light, appeared to glow.

“Your proof,” Lord Vasilik said, holding out his hand, palm up to show his power.

Anset-de watched attentively. The wolf’s hide smiled...

Shifting my concentration to the dead skin, I focused on it, on the living thing inside the dead skin. My vision suddenly expanded, separated the living man from the unliving thing. It

overlay him like oil on skin, and I realized he drew on it for protection. An animal strength, an animal life, twisted with pain, hate and even affection, pinned to the hide, to Anset-de.

Finally, I saw the warlord's fortune.

He was talking, a hand hovering over one of his charms, watching Lord Vasilik begin his spell. A bubble of saliva touched the corner of his mouth, turned red and slid into his beard. More followed, the blood running out and painting his teeth. A hole in his body frayed open just below his ribs, exposing more dark blood. He had three days.

My breath caught, and suddenly Anset-de's attention fixed on me. The dead wolf snarled, a sound I heard as a blast of winter storm. Like a loyal dog, it surged around Anset-de, hiding him, guarding him against my sight. The pebbled eyes blazed bright, and the shadows lunged at me, intent on ripping me apart.

'No!' I shouted, desperately pushing back, and something inside me seemed to snap.

Instantly, the howling stopped, as did all speech in the tent, startled heads turning towards me.

Anset-de scowled, rising from his seat.

My body staggered forward as if shoved, stopping in the middle of the rug, directly before Anset-de.

"No," I said again, shaking but unable to retreat.

The initial astonishment at my audacity wore off, and everyone reached for knives.

"Hold," Anset-de commanded, hand flashing out to stop his men from rising to kill me.

My next words were not mine, pulled out of my mouth as though I were merely a flute being played. "In three days, you will die, Anset-de," My hand lifted, pointing at the wolf's skin. "I know what you have done, and it will not save you." My lips curled up into a gleeful smile.

Anset-de glared, ruddy cheeks losing color. He touched the gold hanging from his chest. For a moment, I thought he would speak; the questions were there, filling the room. Several hands made warding signs. My body turned, holding out a hand to take in Lord Vasilik as well, still grinning. “The best choice is a fair fight. See which of you has the better sorcery.”

For one heartbeat, everyone was still, staring as though I had grown two heads. I couldn’t read Lord Vasilik’s expression. And then it felt as if I’d been dropped, and I was suddenly myself. I gasped, body shaking, sinking down to my knees.

“Dark demon,” someone hissed.

A hand grabbed my collar from behind and I heard the shiver of a knife being unsheathed. Everyone began talking angrily, hands flying to weapons. I was jerked backward, then other hands grabbed hold of me, tearing me away from Anset-de’s men. I felt strangely detached and couldn’t seem to get control of my limbs to fight my way free. Suddenly, Asa was there, pulling me tightly to him and turning his body between me and the room. I barely kept my feet as he swept me through a back doorway and kept going until we were in our own rooms, single brazier lit and smelling of Hepsiba’s teas.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he asked in disbelief, letting me go to again stumble to my knees.

“I,” I tried, and stopped to bite back bile. I had no idea what had happened.

A bucket appeared under my chin, Hepsiba’s strong and slender hands guiding mine to hold it.

“What happened?” she asked over my head, one hand against my forehead, keeping my hair back.

I retched into the bucket.

“He told Anset-de he’d die in three days, and he and Vasilik should fight it out with sorcery,” Asa summed it up.

Sitting up with the bucket in my lap, I looked at him. I had no good explanation, at least not for whatever had possessed me to say what I had.

“I saw how they would die. It’s in three days, for all of them. Lord Vasilik is going to need this battle.”

Asa regarded me, as if wanting to tell me off and knowing it would do no good. He turned to Hepsiba. “I have to get back out there.”

“I’ll watch him,” she assured.

He disappeared back the way we’d come.

Dark gods, what *had* possessed me? I’d just told two warlords what to do.

But it hadn’t been me. I studied my hands holding the bucket, sallow and white knuckled. For those moments in the tent, standing between two men who could have me killed with a word, I’d watched my hands point, my body move without any help from me. I retched again, but nothing came up. The pain in my head nearly blinded me.

“Is it always this bad?” Hepsiba asked, watching me heave.

“No,” I whispered, closing my eyes, hoping it would help.

Seeing fortunes could be gruesomely disturbing, and could make me pray to the Harvester that mine would be quick when it came, but they were never physically painful, neither were premonitions. They definitely never left me feeling as though my body had been usurped.

“I don’t know what happened,” I said, although something in the back of my mind seemed amused.

Hepsiba frowned, but she didn't say anything as she slid a hand under my arm and helped me move onto the furs closer to the brazier. I set the bucket down and held onto my head.

"The headache is back?" she asked.

I nodded.

"May I?" she put her hands over mine, gently touching my temples. I didn't object as she began making slow circular motions along my skull. If she could stop the feeling that my head had been sliced in two, I'd let her do anything. Slowly the pain began to ease, but my thoughts didn't.

The dead wolf's eyes appeared in the black behind my eyes, watching me. I didn't know what to make of it either. Dead, but not a ghost, it was attached to what was left of its body, and to Anset-de.

"Hepsiba," her name slurred a little as I tried to focus. "When you kill an animal to wear its skin, does its spirit stay?"

Briefly, her fingers paused, then resumed.

"Why do you ask?" she asked.

"Anset-de wears a wolf skin, and the wolf is somehow still in it. He draws on it for power."

Her fingers kept moving, taking their time. I didn't press for an answer. I was tired of hurting, and whatever she was doing helped. Eventually, she came around and sat beside me crossing her long legs and reaching to fill a cup with hot water and herbs.

"Drink," she instructed. "It should work just as well the second time."

Automatically, I obeyed, inhaling the aromatic steam.

"There is a part of the animal that lingers," she said solemnly. "It is not the soul or spirit. During a hunt, you must prove yourself to the animal, show it that you're worthy of its gift. So,

when you make the kill, you must ask permission. It's that gift that lingers, a blessing allowing you to take the animal's shape and remember what it gave you."

"Then, the animal can't act on its own once you've killed it."

She half winced, and I realized how callus I had sounded. "No, it can't," she answered, waving me off before I could attempt to apologize.

"It's cruel to presume the right to an animal's spirit and force it to remain here," she said. "The gods will never recognize such a use as clean. A skin-wearer must never forget that."

I nodded, taking a large gulp of tea.

Hepsiba jerked her head up to stare behind me, swiftly uncurling her legs and standing in the same motion.

"My lord," she began, and stopped.

Even without looking, his anger was nearly palpable, like a hot knife hovering between my shoulder blades. Hoping I wouldn't be sick again, I rose to my feet and turned to face the dead man.

He stood still, attention fixed on us, hands hanging loose at his sides, his fury coiling and seething about him. He reminded me of an animal ready to spring for my throat.

I said the only thing I thought might keep me alive. "Anset-de and his people will die in three nights at your hands. The power you receive from it will be vital to your success."

Only the fire in the brazier made any sound. He did not move, and I dared not look away.

"Hepsiba," he said, voice devoid of emotion. "Follow after Asa and see what you can learn."

She bowed, brushing reassuring fingers against my elbows as she left me alone.

He waited long enough for her to be truly gone, then within my next breath, his hand cracked across my face.

My vision blacked, neck jerking with the force. It took a moment for the hot pain to spread across my cheekbone. He let me recover before he spoke.

“You are lucky,” he said. “Had you behaved in such a way where all could see, I would be forced to kill you, out of principle. As it is, an apology and demonstration of your loyalty before my generals will suffice.”

“Yes, my lord,” I said. I did not touch my stinging cheek.

“You have made an enemy of Anset-de,” he continued. “But he took your words as prophetic, and he has agreed to a fair test of our armies. No running, no tricks.”

I bowed my head. He seemed to be waiting for me to respond.

“I dreamed it,” I said, not having anything else I could say. “Right before Anset-de arrived...”

I told him the dream, in as much detail as I could. He said nothing, face unreadable, and I continued with Anset-de’s fortune, the dead wolf’s skin, then I faltered.

“It attacked me. And after...” I hesitated, still unable to understand it. I met his eyes again, hoping he would believe me. “I have never prophesied before. I don’t know what happened, but I didn’t intentionally work against you.”

The heat from the brazier scorched the backs of my legs, pounded with my receding headache. I refused to shift my weight to a more comfortable position.

“I would know if you tried to thwart our bargain,” he finally said. “I will return for you at sunrise, when you will prove to my generals that you are in my control. You will have answers for me. What your dream means, why Anset-de needs to die, and why this dead wolf is important.”

“Yes, my lord,” I bowed at the waist. I didn’t consider asking what would happen should I have no answers for him. It was already heading towards midnight.

Chapter 6

There were only two things my mother bothered teaching me. The first was how to look smaller than I was. The second was a brief lesson on how to read the rune bones. She told me each of their names, and how to ask a question, and then for some reason I never understood, she related how her grandfather had made them from the bones of an albino mantla, a small foxlike creature that lived in all three realms. As he bleached them, and carved the runes into each smooth, white surface, he'd worked prayers and spells into them to guide his bloodline through the generations.

The first time I held them, I knew my mother was right. The bones felt warm against my skin, tingling as though they were alive and knew who I was. When she died, they became mine.

Now, I frantically fished them out from my pack, which I kept in the room Lord Vasilik had designated as mine. I'd found all of it, even some of the cut pine, sitting beside my bedding the morning after we'd sealed our bargain. I didn't ask how he'd secured all my possessions back from Peytik. The only thing of real value was the bones, but I found I was inordinately grateful not to start completely over again. It would make leaving easier, once I was free of the bargain.

If I didn't ruin it all now. If I hadn't already.

No. I firmly ignored the knot in my belly, refused to touch my reddened cheek. This was nothing new. Once my mother was dead, my father had frequently demanded I read fortunes for him, but nothing like this.

I bit my lip. It didn't matter.

I knelt, smoothed out one of my blankets to create an even space to cast, then with my finger, I traced a circle across the fabric. I repeated the motion three times, once for each realm, naming each as I did.

“Bright and Dark gods, please let this work,” I half prayed, sitting back, and shaking the bones into my palm. They felt warm, almost eager. “I need answers,” I said to them.

Closing my eyes, I extended the hand holding the bones out parallel to the ground. So many questions, about the dream, the wolf, and whatever had happened. It seemed like a snow storm whipping about in my head.

My hand wavered, the bones feeling almost hot.

The wolf’s dead eyes loomed, as though it were still watching me. I’d start there. I sucked in a breath through my teeth, asked my first question: “How do we get rid of the dead wolf?”

The bones dropped from my hand, clicking against each other as they fell. One stuck to the sweat of my palm, but I didn’t shake it off. I turned my still open palm up, cupping the bone against my lifeline, enfolding it in my fist. I didn’t look at it. Apparently, it wasn’t meant to be part of the answer.

On the blanket, the bones scattered in a wide arc, three of them skittering to the very edge of where I’d traced the circles. It was a violent pattern of opposing sets, but at least it was an answer. My eyes traveled around them, reading each rune in the order they caught my eye.

Power, judgement, and pain. Defeat, death and failure...the other bones all aligned with those sets. I waited to understand.

Gradually, the bones appeared brighter, seeming to capture light from another source than my lamp. In contrast, the runes carved into them darkened, rejecting any light, and becoming depthless.

The wolf would be mine to deal with.

Both patterned sets oriented towards myself and the wolf. My power, my judgement, and pain. The wolf's defeat, the wolf's death, and failure. I began to breathe a sigh of relief, and then the meaning shifted, reversing our roles to my defeat, death, and failure. How was that possible?

It was true, I had never seen my own death, and I had not seen anything of the wolf except that it was already dead. More than a ghost, but much less than Lord Vasilik. However, the bones should have clarified the wolf's fate.

What was I willing to do? The question drifted across my mind as if the bones were asking me.

I opened my palm and looked at the excluded rune bone, as luminous as the bones strewn on the blanket. Possibility.

I frowned. Feeling that the decision of how to interpret it was mine. What am I willing to do? I didn't have an answer.

Hastily, I scooped all the bones back up, rolled them around, and again held them out. I asked Lord Vasilik's question. "Why does Anset-de need to die?"

The bones clacked as they dropped, clustered in a pile. Many of them showed no rune. Only one of them appeared to mean anything; the guarding rune. No understanding came with it. I tried again, changing the question, and hoping that would bring a better answer.

"What purpose will Anset-de's death serve?"

They bounced, settled in a similar pattern as before.

I tried a third time, rolling the bones around in my hand, rewording and mulling the question over and over before speaking it aloud.

"Why will a battle serve Lord Vasilik's purpose better than an alliance?"

Only the guarding rune showed again. It wasn't enough.

Panic rose in my gut. This was exactly how the last month had gone; every question I asked, hoping for guidance as to how to fulfill my bargain, came up with nothing.

I stood up, leaving the bones where they were, and stalked back out to the brazier. The fire had burned down to the dull red of the coals, leaving a single lantern to illuminate the room, which was just enough light to distinguish the lumps of blankets, low stools, and the bucket. It needed to be cleaned out.

I picked it up carefully so nothing sloshed, and carried it out the back of the tent. Frozen air cracked in my lungs as I breathed in, but I pulled in deeper breaths as I walked to the edge of camp. There was a dip in the hills and a designated open space where bodily business was taken care of for this section of the horde.

I held my breath and dumped the contents of the bucket into the current set of holes dug into the ground, watching the liquid splash into the mud to become absorbed along with all the other waste. On a nearby stump, sat a large block of salt and a knife, and I scraped some white crystals off the block and into the bucket, using some of it to scrub over my hands. It was abrasive, and left raw streaks across my palms and knuckles.

What was I to do now? Fortune telling was the surest way I knew to find answers, and that had failed. I walked away from the salt block and latrine area to the very outskirts of the camp. A sentry stood up from another stump.

“Hey, oh?” he called, and even in the darkness I could see him looking me up and down. His hand twitched on his spear, and I paused, studying him in turn. He was older, the white in his beard not just flakes of snow. He relaxed once he realized I wore Lord Vasilik’s colors. “What you about boy?” he asked.

“Just getting some snow,” I said, holding up the bucket, and kept walking. I didn’t stop until I reached an area without footprints, then squatted and shoveled snow into the bucket, using my hands to melt and rinse the inside. After dumping the chill water, I pile more snow into the bucket. The sentry remained on his feet, watching me from behind. Once full, I left the bucket and gathered a smaller amount into a ball and held it against my cheek. Instantly, it began melting against the heat of my skin, pulling out the dull, stinging throb from the bruising.

Tilting my head back, I watched the stars, picking out the constellations I knew, Attun’s crown, the Dreamer’s rod, and the Harvester’s sickle. The moon wasn’t up yet, leaving her husband and sons to watch over the mortal realm while she took care of hidden things.

The sentry cleared his throat, just loud enough for me to hear. No doubt he was worried I’d wander farther afield, and he didn’t want to be responsible. The snow in my hand was almost gone, and I shook the last wet chunks onto the ground and picked up the bucket.

“You working some sorcery?” the sentry asked as I drew level with him again. He nodded at the bucket.

I glanced into the bucket. “Just snow,” I said.

“Oh, well,” he shrugged. “I thought maybe you were out here helping our Lord Vasilik prepare for that horse-riding devil. Since things went so bad earlier.”

So, even the regular soldiers knew something. I had to ask, “What happened? I was on other duties.” He didn’t seem to recognize me as Lord Vasilik’s witch boy.

He raised an eyebrow, skeptically, but readily replied. “One of the horsemen tried to work sorcery against Lord Vasilik. Didn’t work of course, but we’re going to be fighting in three days.” His beard split with his smile. “Won’t they be regretting it then!”

I nodded and smiled with him, then made my way back toward Lord Vasilik's tent. The story wasn't entirely untrue; there had been sorcery worked during negotiations. I wanted to laugh, but I kept thinking of how the bones had failed me. Would that I *could* use the bucket of snow to work some sorcery.

As I stepped around the pegs of a tent, General Gostle walked past, trailing his retinue of underlings. I stopped, waiting for a clear path once they turned down another row of tents. At that moment, a runner dashed up and the entire group stopped right in front of me as the stringy young girl, probably no older than ten, rapid fired her message the general.

"Master Ivak says there isn't any more honey leaf, and won't be until the passes open up in the spring. He says —"

"Tell master Ivak," Gostle interrupted, "that he better go make the last sorry man he sold some to give it back. Or I'll just come remind him of what he owes me."

The girl nodded, not taking any offense at his harsh tone, and ran off.

"Bright gods," Gostle grumbled to his second, then looked over his shoulder and saw me. "Witch boy," he glared. All heads turned. I gripped the bucket more tightly. "Alex," he said to his second, "I'll be along shortly."

Alex snapped his fingers and the group moved away, quite a few shooting looks at me and the general over their shoulders. Gostle stepped around the tent peg, his chest nearly touching the bucket.

"I remember you," he said, eyes squinting in the inconsistent light of torches. His lips were overly pink within his blond beard. "One of Maxim's priests said you could see the future, but he died before he proved it. Maybe he wasn't so shit crazy after all. What are you doing here? You working your Dark sorceries on us? You think you can bring Lord Vasilik down?"

I didn't blink, and hoped he couldn't hear my heart thudding. "I serve Lord Vasilik, and I only answer to him. Not you," I said.

His snort misted the air in front of me, smelling of fermented garlic, and I shifted my hands to throw the bucket in his face and run, but he stepped back to let me by. I edged around him careful our shoulders didn't touch.

"I hope he bleeds you dry." He called after me.

I pulled my hood lower over my head and didn't stop again. Back in Lord Vasilik's tent, I dumped the snow from the bucket into a large pot where it could melt and be used later. I paced beside the brazier, thinking of what Gostle had said. My coat felt constricting, the wool too heavy.

I hadn't seen many priests in Lord Vasilik's army, just as I hadn't seen nearly as many charms hanging on tents or around men's necks. Maxim had employed priests, and he hadn't been particular whether they worshipped the Brighter or Darker gods.

I jerked at the coat ties, pulling it off and flinging it to the floor. I looked at my wrists. The mark on my forearm, from binding my bargain, was nearly healed, the older matching ones faded to thin white lines that only showed in certain lighting.

My father had watched the priest pull his ceremonial knife across my wrists, had made sure I didn't move while my blood fell into a basin. The priest used it to draw runes in a circle around the figure of the Harvester god, thinking my blood would help him summon the god of death.

Blood was power.

Dark gods...I did know another way to get Lord Vasilik's answers. I curled my fingers into fists, folded my arms against my ribs to hide the scars.

I never told the priest, or my father, that their summoning had half worked.

The bones still lay on the blanket where I'd left them, and I eyed them sidelong. "If I use more power, will you answer me?" I asked, half expecting to hear a verbal reply. They didn't, but they seemed pleased by the idea. What was I willing to do? I scooped them up and into their bag and unhooked my lamp from its place.

At the entrance to Lord Vasilik's rooms, I hesitated, weighing the stupidity of entering a warlord's rooms without permission, and having no answers to give him. What choice did I have? I lifted the flap and walked across the dead man's threshold.

Beside the circles I found another lamp and used mine to light it. Its illumination was enough for me to see the great rings. The center drew my eye, the exact spot where the four direction lines crossed and everything revolved. My lamp needed to be there.

Drawing in a preparatory breath, I stepped over the yellow, blue, and green circles and into the center. Instantly, I felt a curling of something wanting to wrap around me, like I'd stepped into mossy water and the floating tendrils tangled around my ankles. I set the lamp down, the light casting distinct sunburst lines across the pale hide, and becoming its own little circle within the stitched circles. I knelt before it, rolled up my sleeve and pulled the bandage off my forearm, then extended my arm.

I had no idea what I was doing. And yet...

No one had taken my knife away. I pulled it out now, held it out over the almost healed cut, and thought I heard the bones waiting on me in mute anticipation. Was I willing?

If I wanted to fulfill the bargain and be free of the dead man, then it didn't matter if I was willing or not.

"Dark gods, give me answers," I said with all the conviction I could manage.

I reopened the tender cut, and let red liquid drip onto the lantern where it glided down along the rounded metal rim like dew on a leaf. Around me, the floating curls of power surged to the red splashes, covering the lantern, and fanning out with the streaks of light. At the same time, my arm throbbed, and the summoned power washed around my kneeling body like rising water. I pulled the arm close to my body again, as if I could take back what I'd done.

The bones felt almost giddy when I picked them up and held them over the circle of lantern light. A bead of blood welled too thick and dropped from the lantern onto the hide, another round little circle within the others.

“Why must Anset-de die by Lord Vasilik's hand?” I demanded.

The lantern light flickered. I waited for the tick-tick of the bones' bouncing to end before I looked.

Only one rune was turned up, surrounded by the others. One beam of the lantern directly crossed over the white bone, brightening it more than the others. The protection rune, which could also be interpreted as holding or keeping safe. I reached out and ran my finger over it. Somehow, every single bone had missed the drop of blood, leaving it outside of the pattern.

My dream flashed, like a sudden illumination of lightening. Lord Vasilik stood over Anset-de, working sorcery, using a silver medallion.

I needed to find the medallion.

Removing my finger from the rune, I sat back, puzzling. I'd never seen anything like the medallion anywhere except my dream. The curls of power undulated around the lantern and the runes, as if trying to draw my attention, and so I looked back at the bones.

Lord Vasilik needed the medallion. Not to kill Anset-de, but to hold him. And finding it would bring me closer to ending our bargain.

My arm throbbed, and I pressed my other hand against it while I awkwardly rewrapped the bandage around the red line. I rubbed my upper arms for heat, realizing just how chill the room was.

“So, where is it?” I said to the bones.

The swirling power perked up, as though waiting for the question, and curled outward beyond me to the very edge of the main circles. Careful not to disturb the lantern and bones, I turned on my knees to look behind me into the dark of Lord Vasilik’s room.

“Shit,” I breathed, knowing exactly where to look, but I didn’t stand up.

Beyond the large bed and armor rack was a screen. I hadn’t noticed it much before, as it wasn’t my business and it appeared to be leaning against the tent’s far wall. Which, now that I thought about it, made no sense unless there was something behind it the dead man wanted to hide...such as another room.

I should just wait for him to return. If the medallion was already one of his possessions, then there was no logical reason for me to find it. I’d told him my dream, and he must have recognized my description of the silver object.

But I was here, and it was there, and the power I’d summoned into the room urged me to retrieve it now. I wouldn’t get anymore answers until it was in my hands. If I waited, it might be too late to understand. Damned both ways.

I rocked back on my heels and stood, silently cursing, then stepped over the circles, being sure I didn’t touch them. The power followed in a thin tendril, leaking where I’d crossed. I glanced around for anything that might reseal the circles, certain that it wasn’t a good idea to let summoned sorcery wander about. There was nothing around, but as I looked, the sensation of power followed my movements. Perhaps if I was quick.

After fumbling about, I found another lamp dangling from an iron rack beside the giant bedframe and lit it. The screen was made of wood carved into the likeness of a hunting scene and a colorful yellow and gold cloth stretched behind it. Five horses extended elegant legs, sprinting after a roebuck leaping over a streambed, while the riders held horns and bows high. Startled birds danced about the edges of the scene. I couldn't help glancing back at the carved bedframe, and the incongruously twisted tree limbs carved into it.

The screen moved easily away from the tent wall, revealing another doorway, the flap tied to keep it closed. Anything could be back there. I hesitated to release the ties.

I may have developed a tolerance for the dead man's presence, but standing before this clearly hidden place, I couldn't help but envision just what kind of horrors a dead feeder might indulge in...like the Avishki boy and girl.

Power curled up my ankle, warm like it carried the lantern's heat with it. Barely breathing, I unknotted the ties, pulled the flap aside and stepped through.

Cold as deep as the night outside hit me. The warm little tendril at my feet was gone, as if it had been prevented by another power, a resentful power that couldn't leave this room. My skin crawled, feeling the need to instantly turn around and leave...but not without the medallion.

The room was much smaller than any other room in the tent, and taking up most of the space was another sorcerer's circle. It was smaller, cruder than the one I'd set up in, the outer circle decorated with runes I didn't understand. It was painted onto a hide nailed to the ground, as though it might try and escape. The cold came from there. I had the distinct impression that there was an open doorway inside, leading to somewhere made of ice, accompanied by the nerve shuddering sensation that something was watching from within.

I slid along the tent wall, glancing everywhere to find what I was looking for, but unwilling to turn my back on the circle. There was a chest to my right, and I knelt beside it, fingers reaching over the lid to play with the latch. It was locked. I grimaced, leaned around the chest to get a good look at it, only to discover that the chest had no keyhole. Instead, a pattern of metal laced over the lid and down across where a lock should be. I was going to have to get a better look.

Glancing at the circle, thinking I saw something move, I knelt in front of the chest. The twining metal was like the armor Lord Vasilik had died in, an oddly soft substance that warmed under my fingers. There was nothing like a catch or pin that I could use to open it, and I leaned down to see if I'd missed something.

Breathe on it.

The strange thought came as its own breath, and I glanced back to the circle, almost certain I saw color in the center. Had the suggestion come from there? I didn't have time to worry about it. Hands trembling, I placed them on either side of the pattern and blew slowly on the metal, like I was coaxing a coal back to life. It grew almost hot to the touch, and I heard a click. Gingerly, I wedged my fingers into the crack and lifted the lid. The hinges were silent, and the lid heavier than I would have thought. My back completely turned to the circle, I felt the air shift against my neck, as if someone were leaning over my shoulder. I spun around, saw nothing. Almost, I asked if anyone were there, but thought better of it. What if I actually got an answer? I was certain a sliver of blue was forming where no color should be.

I returned my attention to the chest, peering into the depths, praying I'd find nothing more interesting than the medallion I was after. I needed to get out of the room.

There was a shirt and tunic with old, brown bloodstains exactly like what he'd been wearing when he died. I pushed them aside and found an inlaid box resting on a rabbit fur coat. The same

delicate pattern from the chest graced the pale wooden lid, its rectangular edges slightly curved. It was large enough I had to lift it with both hands, sat back on my heels and rested the box on my knees. Thank the gods, it was not locked.

Inside, a bit of fur created a cushion for a needle, a delicately preserved eggshell, a set of ten gold and silver rings, and the skull of a rabbit. They were childlike treasures; of the sort I might have collected if I'd ever had a place to keep them.

There was also the medallion. I lifted it out carefully, so as not to disturb any of the other items. It was heavy, weight pulling against my hand like it didn't want to leave the box. I found myself coaxing it, gently squeezing it in reassurance before drawing it out. A chain trailed behind it.

Once I had it secured, I eased the box back into the chest, replaced the clothing as it had been, and closed the chest. I shivered, my breath misting in the air. The temperature in the room dropped, something like a hand reached over my shoulder, touched my neck. I jumped, flailed at air in panic, and landed on my back...inside the circle. Tiny frost crystals formed in the center of the circle and crept outwards towards me. The color I thought I'd seen coalesced.

Witch boy, a bare breath of sound said.

Tightly clutching the medallion, I tried to get up. The air felt thick. There was a snap as of fingers, and everything went black, all sound stopped. I couldn't even hear my own breathing. The circle had closed.

"Oh, gods," I said with no sound, panic trembling through my body like a sickness.

Tentatively, I reached out a hand until it came up against a barrier so cold it burned. I pulled back, fingers aching.

Witch boy, the whisper came from directly behind me. Two unhappy voices.

Terrified, I slowly turned, and blinked in astonishment. The colors and frost were a misted field. Dry grass peeked through a thin skiff of snow, barely enough to hide the ground. It was difficult to see where mist ended and frost began. Carefully, I stood up, still holding the medallion. The colors were spread across the sky, half hidden by the mists; tinges of purple, faded green and shadowed blue, as of twilight just before the stars appear. In a strange way, it felt familiar, like the long fields of destruction in my dreams.

Witch boy, the whispers came again from behind.

This time, I glanced over my shoulder instead of turning, and caught the impression of two blond heads, red on their bodies. Swallowing, I kept my eyes on the field and whispered back, “What do you want?”

Your fault, the girl hissed.

Your fault, the boy echoed sadly.

“What’s my fault?” I asked.

They said nothing.

“I didn’t give you to him,” I explained. “That was your headman. If you want someone to blame, go haunt him.”

Nothing. I glanced over my shoulder again and saw them still standing there, faces blank. I chose to ignore them, paying attention to the field. The mist didn’t cover everything. It was more like a frost hovering in the air, and long tendrils ran along the ground like pathways, meandering around the clumps of grasses and beyond my line of vision. Two ran on either side of me, unperturbed by the faint lines of the circle, except for a distortion where they touched.

“What do you want?” I finally asked again. I couldn’t keep standing here doing nothing.

Go away, the boy whispered.

“I don’t know how,” I said, and lifted a hand to demonstrate the burning cold when my fingers contacted the edge of the circle’s influence.

“Well, that shouldn’t matter,” a new voice said.

I barely startled this time, turned my head as far as I could without completely turning around. There were dark trees behind me, the beginning line of a forest, all jumbled into a thick, unwelcoming barrier. And yet, the misty paths had no trouble disappearing between the trunks. I knew that once inside, there was no coming back.

“Who?” I began, feeling I should already know the answer.

“Aren’t you his necromancer?” the voice continued. I couldn’t tell if it was mocking me.

The Andish boy and girl were gone, but I still couldn’t see anyone.

“You don’t need a circle, you never have,” the voice lectured. “Your mother knew that.”

“Who are you?” I turned, facing the trees. Of course, there was no one there.

“He’s going to regret this, eventually... Do you see what you need?” the voice, just like the dead man, ignored my question.

I had no idea what it meant.

“Bring the wolf with you next time,” the voice directed. “Its time is over.”

Next time, the two whispers were back, the other voice gone.

Gritting my teeth, I ignored them and looked down at the faint outline of the circle. Now the runes made sense; a miasma of signs for containment, sacrifice, and one that had to do with doorways. The voice said I didn’t need a circle. So, what was I willing to do? What did I have to lose?

Tentatively, I reached with my foot and stepped on the doorway rune. A snap echoed in my ears, and I looked up to the dark room. Behind me, the air thickened, stirring with whispers.

I bolted for the entrance, wrapping the medallion's chain tightly around my hand. Cold air brushed against my back, but the flap fell into place, and the tendril of power – very warm by comparison – wrapped around my feet, as if happy to have me back. Without letting go of the medallion, I retied the flap, pulled the screen into place, and backed away until I stood across the room by the large circle. The tendril came with me.

I made sure to step back into the three rings in exactly the same place I'd left, the tendril followed, and the circle resealed. I sat down before the bones and my lantern, now feeling protected.

Bright and Dark gods, what had I done...and where had I just been? For a while I stared at the darkness across the room, as if I still saw the field and the trees, body aching as badly as I had the night Lord Vasilik first brought me here.

In my hands, the medallion stirred. I looked down, studying its round shape and the raised circles decorating its surface. The silver was tarnished around the grooves, giving it a pocked quality reminiscent of the shadowed blotches across the moon.

"So," I said aloud, redirecting my thoughts back to my original problem, and ignoring the cold that seemed to be inside of me, "how do you help Lord Vasilik defeat Anset-de?"

Similar to my rune bones, I had the distinct impression the medallion heard me. It was old enough to have a mind of its own, as some sorcerous and temperamental objects tended to do over time.

Shifting to a more comfortable position, I faced the lantern and the pattern of runes again, and held up the medallion as if introducing it to the rest. And it was like a door opened to a flood.

"Oh," I breathed shakily, after staring at the medallion's moon surface for a while. "That's what he'll use you for..."

I had Lord Vasilik's answers.

And so many more questions, but there was one I especially needed to ask. Setting the medallion in my lap, I scooped up the bones and held them out towards the lantern. My arm grew tired, my mind debating how best to phrase the question. The lamp was burning low.

"Am I possessed?" I settled on the simplest way, closed my eyes, and opened my hand.

They pattered like raindrops, then stilled. I swallowed before forcing my eyes open.

No. That was all I read. And yet, as I began to relax, there was an undercurrent of humor, as if the bones were laughing at me.

Feeling sick and numb, I gathered up the bones into their bag, then considered what to do with the medallion. I didn't want to wear it. I couldn't help looking at it with the same sort of tolerant revulsion I held for Lord Vasilik, but it wouldn't be right to put it in the bag with the rune bones. I settled for wrapping the chain a few times around my wrist and palm, letting it dangle like an overlarge bracelet charm.

I turned to the lantern, the power from the circle remained concentrated. With my finger, I traced a sunflower and half-moon over the ring of light.

"Thank you," I said in benediction.

Like weeds carried out by a tide, the power ebbed and fell away into the low, now almost sleepy power always present in a circle. It wouldn't follow me. I stood up to find something to clean my blood away from the lamp and hopefully from the hide; I didn't want it sitting around to be used by someone else. There was no longer anything there. The smears on the lantern and single droplet were gone. I picked up the lantern, inspecting it and finding just the metal and candle. Disquieted, I stepped out of the circles, making sure I wasn't followed, and retreated out of the dead man's rooms.

Chapter 7

“You will tell them you saw the battle, that you know Anset-de will die,” Lord Vasilik said. “You will tell them Anset-de used sorcery to attack you, and that is why you did not stay silent. Then you will show them the cut.”

We stood beside the tent door leading into Lord Vasilik’s council room. It was the main room of his expansive tent, with a corridor running between it and the rest of the rooms. I could hear the generals already seated and grumbling about battle plans. He made me look at him.

“Yes, my lord,” I agreed. No excuses, no arguing. In no way was I to embarrass him again. I hadn’t yet told him about the medallion, just that I had the answers he wanted. My gut turned over. We would be having a private meeting after this was over.

He nodded curtly and pushed through into the room. I followed with my head bowed penitently.

“Gentlemen,” Lord Vasilik addressed the seven arrayed around the rug as they had been the evening before. All seven rose and bowed as their warlord entered, then resumed their seats with his permission.

I remained at the back of the room, unmoving. The braziers were lit again, their heat not as heavy, but even leaving off my coat, I was already sweating. I listened as Lord Vasilik had each of them report to him on the night’s preparations, questioning where needed and giving new instructions. No one argued, and any concerns were met with input from anyone who had a solution, the dead man having the final word. And then...

“Curi,” Lord Vasilik called. “Come forward.”

Still keeping my head tilted down, I drew level with his chair and bowed to him.

“Some of you are concerned that Curi is a traitor, a liability to our goals,” he said. “With good reason.”

I kept my eyes on the arm of his chair.

“However,” the dead man continued, “as flattering as your concern is, it is unfounded. Witch, and sorcerer he may be, but he is under my control.”

There were a few uncomfortable shuffles.

“That is no excuse, of course, for the near fatal disruption he caused,” his voice hardened, and I felt his eyes turn to me. “So, we will hear his explanation, and apology.”

With one more step, I adopted the stance and attitude of a runner delivering a message, hands loose at my thighs, feet shoulder width apart.

“I saw Anset-de’s death, and the deaths of his men. It will happen in three days, at the hands of our army. Anset-de recognized I was a witch, and attempted to work sorcery during the negotiations. I stopped him.” I paused to draw in a breath. “I understand my actions were tantamount to rebellion, that I have caused Lord Vasilik trouble. It will not happen again.” I held out my arm, rolled up the sleeve and removed the bandage, the cut bright against my pale skin. “He holds my life through blood.”

“My lord,” General Gostle spoke up. “I know this yellow boy from my time in Maxim’s army. He was a known witch then, sly as a snake. He was part of a rebellion against Maxim but was never punished for it.”

Not true. My only involvement had been when the priest took a knife to me.

“Your concern is noted, Gostle,” Lord Vasilik said. “Although, I would ask, was Maxim a sorcerer, or were any of those who rebelled against him?”

Gostle flushed. “No, my lord.”

“No,” the dead man rose from his seat, placed a hand on the back of my neck. “The boy is useful. He sees fortunes...” and here he lightly chuckled. “I know when each of you will die, thanks to his gifts.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw many of them twitch in surprise.

“You do not throw away a resource, just because it is dangerous. You use it, tame it to your service.” Gently, he tugged at my collar, making me lift my head, showing them the bruising across my cheek, then touched my injured arm. I saw the delicate gold chain in his hand before he slipped it around my wrist.

The charm burned as it had before, spreading up my arm and into my chest. I tried to hold it away from my body, but the pain continued to spread up into my chest, then down into my belly, groin, and legs. I sank to my knees. The dead man continued speaking to his generals, meaningless words because the burning spread into my head, my thoughts. I heard laughing. Why was it so much worse this time?

Abruptly it was gone.

I curled on the floor, heaving in deep breaths, hiding the blurring tears that itched in funnels down my cheeks.

“Get up,” Lord Vasilik admonished.

I unbent slowly, first using my forearms to get rid of the evidence of my weakness. The generals were gone, and I looked up at the dead man, who waited patiently for me to get to my feet.

“Well done,” he said smiling, as if we were conspirators.

I bowed, anticipating the next interrogation.

“Now, tell me what answers you’ve found.”

Knowing there was no way to avoid his finding out how badly I'd breached his privacy, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the medallion. I held it out to him. His smile vanished as he took his property back from me.

"What did you do?" he asked quietly, dangerously.

I bowed again, deeper this time.

"I found your answers, as you ordered me to," I said.

He eyed me suspiciously, as if seeing me for the first time, but as before, he said nothing.

I forced myself to continue. "The medallion will allow you to trap Anset-de and his army once you kill them. But it must be fair, and Anset-de has to believe that you bested him because you are better than he. You need to convince him that you are Vasilik Reborn, just as you claim. Do that, and he will serve you willingly."

"He will be dead," he pointed out.

I didn't acknowledge the irony of his statement, and continued, shaking my head. "Their souls will be trapped in the medallion. At your command."

Silence. Equal parts anger and disbelief warred across his face as he considered what I said. I prayed I'd managed to convince him I had followed his orders.

"Do you understand what you say?" he asked. "The sorcery required?"

"You admitted my ignorance to sorcery and how its laws are supposed to work was an advantage to you. This is what I saw. And it is a step to making you immortal. You will deal with Anset-de, and I will deal with his wolf."

He blinked, astonished by my boldness, then he laughed, humorlessly. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

“Dark gods, I knew you would be worth my effort, but not quite so difficult,” he said, voice controlled, deadly. With one hand, he placed the medallion around his neck, snatched my arm with the other, fingers digging into my cut.

I hissed in pain, struggling to free myself, but it was like trying to pull away from a bear’s jaws. He firmly marched me back to his own rooms.

“I used the circles to get the answers,” I said hastily, having difficulty keeping pace so I wasn’t dragged. “Finding the medallion was necessary to understand it all. I wouldn’t have done it otherwise.”

He didn’t acknowledge me, and didn’t stop until we stood before the entrance flap where he swung me past him and into the room. I stumbled, catching myself on one knee and standing to face him. The door flap fell, leaving me in darkness, and I lost track of his shadowed bulk, until the lamps flared to life. All of them, all at once.

“Show me, then, exactly what you did,” he growled from behind me.

I pivoted, sucking in a breath. He stood too close, and his eyes reflected the lamplight in such a way I was reminded of the dead wolf.

“I took the bones, and I used them in the circle.” I pointed to the enormous hide on the floor.

He moved to the circle’s edge, studying it intently. “You stepped inside it?” he questioned.

“Yes,” I said.

“You used blood.” That was not a question.

“Yes,” I said. There was blood on my shirt sleeve from where his fingers had broken into the cut. “I needed the power.”

“Needed...” he repeated. “And it led you to the medallion?”

“Yes,” I answered, cautiously.

“So, you stepped out of the circle while it was still active?” he frowned at me, then at the circle, hovered his hand over the spot where I’d crossed. He seemed wary, puzzled, then abruptly came back to me, like a hound on a scent.

“It led you to my door,” he said.

Warily, I took one step back from him.

“And what else did you see?” he asked, looming close.

“Nothing I’d speak of to anyone else,” I answered truthfully. If I could, I’d forget the whole night. Ever since I’d stepped out of the circle, the mists seemed to have followed me. Add to that, the wrongness about him was stronger, harder to ignore.

He laughed again, and I stiffened, enduring the grating sound, my nails digging into my palms.

“Did you step through?” he asked.

He didn’t wait for me to answer, but he again grabbed my arm and yanked me towards the hidden room. I stumbled forward, unable to stop, unable to follow his quick movements as he removed the screen, pulled away the ties and forced me back into that cold place.

Two blond heads outlined in the dark, hovered inside of the circle. Grimacing, I refused to look at them, but he didn’t let go of my arm. Frost leaked from the circle, over the doorway rune.

“A feeder,” he said, dragging me forward to the very edge of the circle, my toes barely missed touching the runes, “must have a door, a way to both visit and feed death. It should never be left open.”

So, the misted field had been death, or the edge of it. I found I wasn’t surprised, but then, who was the voice that spoke to me? He pushed me to my knees, squatted down himself, and

running a finger over the leaking rune, then he snapped his fingers. It sealed, and the frost began to melt. The blond apparitions didn't fade. Finally, he let go of my arm, but I didn't dare move.

“You remember I told you that should you fail, I would keep you as any feeder would?”

He took my silence for an affirmative answer, rising from his crouch and gesturing for me to do the same. I said nothing of the Andish boy and girl, listening within the circle.

Chapter 8

The drums beat an incessant rhythm in my ears, only slightly muffled by my hood. I pulled it tighter against the night's chill. Lord Vasilik stood dead center in the wide plains behind the tents, watching the generals place the finishing touches to five huge log piles ranging in a wide circle around him. They grew bigger than houses, and at the center of each stack, a crossed pole bound in straw rose up like a candle wick, ready to be lit.

I stood with Asa and Hepsiba a few steps behind Lord Vasilik, waiting for the dancing to begin. The atmosphere was intensely festive, even as it began to snow, the horde ranging around the outer edges of the field and milling close to the stacks like ants. Even with the vast space between each ready bonfire, I couldn't see how the entire horde would be able to dance.

Barrels were flung onto the top of each stack, smashing against the straw poles. Liquid ran down over the wood to cheers. Hepsiba clapped, cheering along with them. She kept shifting her stance in time with the drum beats, bouncing with energy.

This was tradition in Vasilik's army, Hepsiba told me. They always danced the night before a battle. And then they wouldn't lose.

Lord Vasilik raised his arms, one hand open, the other holding an unlit torch. Instantly, the drumming stopped, and the horde stilled, even those who weren't close enough to see him, as though they were attuned to his movements. The snow fell, the anticipation rose as the generals joined us in the middle, each of them holding an arrow tipped towards the sky in mimic of the torch. I held my breath, feeling power build in the air.

The dead man spoke a single word. It curled up from his mouth like a living thing and wrapped around the torch. Flames burst into the dark.

Four of the generals stepped forward, along with Asa, touching their arrow tips to the light, then they turned and walked in the direction of a wooden mound, their movements synchronous, the individual flames delicate moving flowers. Asa fitted the arrow to his large bow, lifted it high into the snowy night, and taking aim at the northern mound. Hepsiba put a hand on my arm, leaning towards Asa's arrow as though it were her will that would release it.

Lord Vasilik spoke again, a loud crying chant. The arrows flew, arced up like comets of gold. The world seemed to hold its breath. They struck in unison, burying into the straw poles and broken barrels. Flames burst into the sky, like powerful beasts suddenly set free. I felt sorcery surge, everything snapping into place.

It was blinding.

Howls sprang from every throat, deafening. The drums beat again, faster and heavier than before. Louder. Hepsiba laughed and leapt towards Asa, spreading her arms and spinning in time with her face turned up to the snow, the firelight catching bronze in her hair.

I held my breath, arms folded tightly across my chest.

A moment later, Asa joined her, taking her hand and joining her spin. He had to bend down to catch her waist, and she had to raise on her toes, but soon they were flying, their feet carrying them first with the drum, then faster to a tune I couldn't hear. Other bodies joined them, leaping to their own tunes, all somehow in harmony with the drumming flames, weaving between the fires and the large space between.

Without realizing it, I stepped closer to the dead man.

"What did you say?" I asked, awed, and horrified at once.

"What did I say?" he asked back. "You heard my words, you felt it."

“It’s a circle with all of us in it,” I said, feeling a kind of pulse in the flashing bodies, light and shadows, and drums. Sorcery spun in and around, knitting about into the air, weaving a pattern that centered back to him.

“Gods,” I said, realizing what I was seeing. “That’s how you know even Gostle won’t betray you. They can’t because they’re yours.”

He smiled with his teeth.

I looked at my boots, where snow had begun to settle. “Is this why they all believe you to be Vasilik Reborn? What happens if you lose control over them?”

Mildly exasperated, he glanced at me and then back to the dancing. “Look at them, Curi, and look at the circle. Is it doing them any harm?”

I watched, unable to distinguish any one individual in the mass of prancing men, sorcery, and light. The fires burned brighter than they should, rising like beacons in a glow that reflected off the clouds. From a distance, it probably looked like we’d set the camp on fire, and the screams were of dying men. I felt a sudden, physical urge to join, to lift my feet, to laugh in defiance of reality itself. To give in to euphoria.

Shaking my head to clear it, I realized the gold of the fires’ light appeared to have seeped into the ground, melting the snow, and extending almost to myself and Lord Vasilik. But it stopped short, the shadows around him defying nature and remaining in a puddled circle at his feet, a dark moon within the brilliance of the sun.

I leaned a step closer to him, putting a foot in his shadow, and instantly my perception shifted. Their power, their lives flowing into him, his twining out into a single common thread: they served Vasilik Reborn, there was hope, and they would not fail. He was the center of the body that was the many. It was sorcery on a level with Vasilik the Conqueror and the Ancients.

“No,” he set me back a step from him, out of his shadow. I lost the vision, the threads of his sorcery. The desire to dance increased again, a tug at my own life and power. I felt the circle pulling at me, wanting to incorporate me.

“Do they know?” I asked, not sure if I meant just the circles, but that he was dead, and he’d rule them forever if this campaign succeeded.

“You should dance,” he said.

Vehemently, I shook my head. He already had enough of me by blood.

“Sorcery is a tool,” he said. “And it is one that you constantly use, witch boy. Bright or Dark does not matter. They dance, and they become stronger. They dance, and they know the battle can be won. They dance, and they trust me.”

“Most warlords just give a speech...” I muttered, still fighting the desire to leap with the shadows.

“Are you prepared for the wolf?” he changed the subject abruptly.

I grimaced, unwilling to verbalize the answer.

“I knew you’d be in Avishki,” he said.

All thoughts of dancing, and how woefully prepared I was for the wolf, left me. I stared at him.

“A feeder knows when death is nearby, and you are always in proximity to it. That is the mark of a necromancer. You need no circle or doorway. The fact that you could step in and out of one without consequence is proof.” He looked away from the dancing, down his nose at me. “My own sorcery tells me your prophecy was inevitable. That you are essential to me.” His smile became brittle, as pleased with the idea as I was.

It was more frightening than his feeder's circle; to think that I had some kind of influence with him.

"I will be ready for the wolf," I said.

With a nod, he turned to watch the fires again. "Go and dance," he said.

I still didn't want to; knew I couldn't continue to stand there. And just then, Hepsiba appeared, face flushed and her curls free of their braid. She could have been a child of the sun god.

"Come dance with me!" she laughed, holding out a hand for me to take.

Gods, I wanted to, but still hesitated.

Asa's bellowing laugh made me jump, and Lord Vasilik's hand stopped me from again stepping into his shadow. The big man stood behind me, grinning and sweat slicking his skin and damp hair.

"You're too wild for him, my dear," he said to Hepsiba. Then to me, "Come and dance with us." I almost missed the glance he gave Lord Vasilik as he added, "Some of us keep our heads better than others."

Lord Vasilik's hand gave me a small shove in the back. Hepsiba grabbed my reluctant hand, and Asa scooped up my other. As if on their own, my feet picked up in time with the drums as Hepsiba and Asa linked their free hands, forming our own small circle.

We danced.

I found my body moving intime with theirs, spinning around the fires, weaving between the other undulating bodies. Asa became our anchor, Hepsiba and I spinning and flying like flags. It was like being drunk, and I lost track of my hesitancy in the light that glinted in Hepsiba's hair, in the strength of Asa's hand, and in the falling snow that thickened and hissed on the fires. Life, power wrapped around me, and I saw my own spinning outward to encompass them, theirs to me.

Even the threads of connection I shared in the bargain twined and became part of my moving feet. I had never danced like this before. Everything was mine, and mine was theirs, the Bright fires and Dark shadows, circling in the beating of the drums...

I turned my face skyward and laughed.

My euphoria faded once we returned to the tent, the bonfires banked and the circle broken. I would have headed directly to my bedding, but I was also hungry, and loaves of bread and dried fruit were resting on a bench near the brazier.

"Oh, that looks good," Asa said, letting the flap fall.

Already at the bench, Hepsiba selected a few small loaves for herself and a bowl of apricots.

Asa joined her, bending nearly in half to reach the bench. He shoved a whole loaf in his mouth before following Hepsiba's civilized example. I took three loaves over to the brazier sitting a little apart from them. Hepsiba shifted closer, drawing Asa with her, and slid the apricot bowl to the empty space between us. None of us felt the need to break the food filled silence, at least, not until Asa got up for more.

Hepsiba popped a dried apricot into her mouth, chewed it slowly before swallowing. Then she tilted her head in my direction. "So, what did you think?"

I hesitated, wondering how much I should say of the sorcery. "It wasn't what I expected."

She ate another apricot. "Have you never danced before?"

"Not before a battle," I said, shifting my legs. They'd be sore tomorrow. Sacrifices and petitions to the Bright and Dark gods were the norm I'd experienced. "I've never really danced."

"Really?" she said surprised, "No wonder you were so nervous."

“No, he wasn’t,” Asa contradicted as he lowered himself back down with three more loaves and a bowl of shriveled apples. “You’re just missing the sophisticated galivanting that makes you look like a peacock.”

“What’s a peacock?” I asked.

“No, I’m not,” Hepsiba said at the same time.

Asa paused with an apple half way to his mouth, glancing between us.

“It’s a bird,” Hepsiba supplied. “A bit like a chicken, but with a long neck like a goose, and its feathers are blue and green. It has a huge tail that it spreads out to make itself look bigger than it is.” She fanned out her hands and fluttered her fingers. “And not all dances look like that,” she added, glaring.

“Sure,” Asa shrugged, biting his apple.

“It’s a southern bird, isn’t it,” I said, trying to picture a long-necked blue chicken.

“And a lot of merchants and lords think they look pretty in their gardens.” Asa added with a snort. Hepsiba nodded in grudging agreement.

“Oranges and peacocks,” I mused. “What other wonders are in the south?”

“The ocean,” Hepsiba said instantly.

“Salt water?” I asked.

“Mm-hmmm,” she said almost wistfully. “With sand as white as the snow here, and warm breezes...”

“Someone’s ready for spring,” Asa said, rubbing a hand across her back.

She leaned into his arm, smiling at him a little sadly.

I steeled my nerve to ask what I hadn’t yet dared, as they never brought it up. Tonight, I felt I could. “Are you from the south?”

Two sets of discerning eyes met mine, blue and yellow.

“You don’t have to tell me,” I retracted.

“No,” Hepsiba smiled, although it wasn’t as bright. “It’s all right. It’s obvious we’re not from here.”

“But, it’s so far away, no one cares,” Asa added.

“Albonii isn’t that much farther than Albat,” Hepsiba said. “But it is prettier. And when the oranges and lemons are in bloom, its paradise. Even you said so.” She poked Asa.

“Yes, it is. I liked the beach,” he agreed, although not as nostalgically.

“Why would you leave?” I asked, imagining blue water, warm air, and orange trees.

“Oh, well,” Hepsiba squirmed. “No where’s perfect.”

“Because you are skin-wearers?” I speculated.

“That was only part of it,” Asa answered me. Hepsiba fell silent, and he adjusted how he was sitting to let her fit against him. She didn’t protest, and he continued. “Skin-wearers aren’t that obvious unless you know what you’re looking for. I’ve been one for most my life, and no one ever found me out until I started working for the richest man in Albonii. He had two children, a girl and a boy. And one day the boy, Gebriel, got upset and ran away. All the servants were called out to search for him. During the searching he saw me change and told his sister, who decided to confront me for scaring him.” He patted Hepsiba’s shoulder. “Even Geb agreed she was scarier than me.”

“The main reason we left,” Hepsiba interjected, “was because my father thought Asa was stealing me away.”

“I didn’t steal anything, but I can understand why he saw it that way,” Asa said, addressing Hepsiba. “He didn’t want you or Geb to leave, and he used my skin-wearing as a way of trying to make sure you stayed.”

Hepsiba's lips thinned, and she got up, found her pot, and began rummaging in her herbs to make tea. Asa watched her, brow furrowed in concern, but he turned back to me.

"Geb was with me when their father came to arrest me. There was a misunderstanding, and... Geb was killed," Asa said.

Behind him, Hepsiba stilled, herbs half crushed in her hand.

"Hepsiba saw. So, when her father tried to blame it on me..." he wrapped up the tale quietly. "We left. Ran into Vasilik later."

I didn't know what to say. Everyone died, painfully, peacefully, gruesomely, and it didn't matter in the end. I remembered one of the water women asking me why I hadn't cried when my mother died. After all, she had taken care of me, and she was my mother, but I'd never cared for her like Hepsiba and Asa clearly had for Gebreil. She'd never encouraged it. My chest hurt.

"Sometimes, you're like him," Asa finished.

Abruptly, Hepsiba threw the herbs back on the table and rushed out of the tent.

Asa rolled onto his knees, reached out a hand to pat my knee, smiled sadly then went after her.

I didn't sleep for a while.

The wolf's pebble eyes followed me. I ran through the frost and mist, harder, faster, until I couldn't breathe, throat burning. The eyes were still there, hating, hunting, and waiting for me to fall. A tree rose like a wall before me, and I couldn't miss it, just managed to put up my arms and stop my face from hitting first. Behind me, the wolf howled. *Don't see me*, I thought, reaching up and drawing a small circle and line over my forehead. *Don't see me*, I growled out, pushing against the force of the wolf.

Witch boy? the whisper was questioning.

“Go away,” I tried to say, turned to look anyway.

She was as solid as in life, blond hair undone, the ties of her dress loose and showing her fragile collar bones. Frowning, she looked beyond me, then met my eyes again.

What are you going to do? she asked, as though she didn’t believe I would do anything.

I didn’t know.

“She has a point,” the disembodied voice said. I put my back to the tree, glancing about, and saw nothing. “None of them are going to leave you alone until you do something about it.”

The wolf snarled in the dark before me.

“Like what?” I asked, frustrated.

“I thought that was obvious,” the voice said, disappointed. “Everyone has a path they ought to follow. Some lose sight of it.”

The girl was fading, as if she wasn’t sure she liked the voice. Beneath her feet, the ground remained white. One of the frosted paths. The pebble eyes prowled in the darkness, avoiding the white ribbon.

“Ah,” the voice breathed. “Looks like someone lost their way.”

The wolf howled. My forehead burned.

I woke up.

“You’re up early,” Asa commented when I emerged into the brazier room.

He and Hepsiba sat side-by-side in their usual place beside the brazier, facing the outer entrance. Neither looked any the worse for their dancing, or like anything else had happened last night.

I shrugged. Early was a relative term considering half the horde didn't do much until midday, or night hours, including Lord Vasilik. I found my usual spot and knelt facing them.

"I need your help," I said, before I could change my mind. I didn't have time.

They both perked up.

"I need to get into Anset-de's tent."

"Why?" they asked in unison.

"His wolf pelt," I said. "I need a piece of it if I'm going to get rid of it."

"Maybe the rumors are right," Asa said to neither of us in particular. "Maybe you are a bit crazy."

Hepsiba punched his arm.

I ignored him. "Will you help me?"

"That's quite a risk," Asa said. "There isn't another way?"

"Not that I've been able to figure out," I admitted.

"Have you asked Vasilik?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "No. He told me it was my problem."

They considered, passing looks between them, and apparently having a full conversation. Finally, Hepsiba turned to me, "He's using it as a source of power, isn't he?"

I nodded. "I think it's part of how he uses sorcery. It protects him, but it also hates him...I'm not quite sure which is stronger."

Asa frowned. "You never keep an animal here after its time. Any skin-wearer knows that."

"I don't think Anset-de is a skin-wearer," I said.

"Oh, I know," Asa said coldly. "But he still shouldn't have done it." He looked at Hepsiba.

"We'll have to be quick," she said. "Anset-de will be on alert for anything."

“And pray we don’t get caught,” Asa added. “I don’t want to explain that one to Vasilik.”

They didn’t want me to come with them, and their reasons were good. Anset-de would certainly recognize me if he saw me.

I argued anyway. “If anything happens, I’ll be the one to take the blame. And I know how to go unseen in a camp, even an enemy one.” I wouldn’t have survived Maxim’s army so well if I hadn’t.

“We also know how,” Asa argued back. “And we know how to work together to get it done quick. Besides,” he cut off my protest, “if something happens to one of us, you and the horde still have a chance. If we lose you, we don’t. And, we’ve been there a few times already.”

“Watch our backs,” Hepsiba said. “If something does go wrong, then we’ll try sending you in.”

I didn’t like it, but I couldn’t counter their logic, and followed them out of camp to a hidden stand of trees, where they proceeded to change.

“Why not in the tent?” I couldn’t help but ask, my back to them as they stripped down.

“Because we don’t advertise it,” Asa answered. “Someone would eventually notice that two animals had taken up residence in Vasilik’s tents, and from there, it wouldn’t be hard to notice us missing. Everyone knows we spy and run errands for him, so out here, it doesn’t matter if we disappear.”

A few moments later, a soft head pushed its way under my hand, and I looked down into the face of a grey fox, who grinned up at me. A much larger wolf joined her, circling me once, and leading the way around the hills to the back of Anset-de’s camp.

We crouched between a snow drift and scrub brush, within sight of a picket line of horses and penned cattle. Asa scratched a paw in the snow beside me, then touched my leg, his dog-like face very serious. Stay. I nodded.

Hepsiba sat close on my other side, leaning against my leg and arm. I was tempted to pet her head again, but kept my hands to myself. They exchanged a look, Asa huffing a cloud of mist into the air. He crouched and dashed away.

We waited, long enough that I was tempted to peer over the snow and see if anything was happening. Hepsiba put a paw on my hand, holding me still.

A commotion erupted among the horses. Hepsiba left my side. I leaned just far enough to the side that I could see a little through the scrub brush. They snorted and shied, the cows lowing and pressing against their pens and one of the poles gave way. Men's voices joined the animals, trying to round them up before they could stampede away. A few of them jumped onto horses, and galloped around, getting ahead of the cows, and whistling them back. Soon, everything settled back into the regular bustle of an army preparing for battle.

I waited until I began wondering where they were. I eyed the line of horses. If I eased my way through them, I could probably blend right in. Many of the soldiers had their hoods pulled up against the cold, but then it would be impossible to find Asa and Hepsiba.

A growl spun me around to face Asa.

"You probably soured their milk," I said.

He pulled back his lips in amusement. One of his teeth was black. He shook himself, trotted close and nudged me in the back to get up.

"Where's Hepsiba, we're not waiting for her?" It didn't seem like him.

He looked down his long nose, waiting for me to do as he said. I glanced back to Anset-de's camp, but got up and followed him.

We hadn't made it half-way back around Anset-de's camp when Hepsiba waltzed onto our path, energetic as a puppy in spring. She fell into step beside me, lifted her head and presented a tuft of black fur. Without even touching it, I knew it came from the wolf skin. There was a twisted little malice in the hairs that resented their removal from the whole.

"Thank you," I said, taking it from her and tucking it into a pocket, then wiped my hand on my shirt. The feel of it seemed to linger.

Her tail brushed my leg as she trotted to the wolf, rubbing her head against his side, and continuing on our path back.

Chapter 9

The sun vanished, and the moon delayed her appearance. The clouds had moved out, letting the gods of night watch unimpeded. From the cover of my hiding place, a stand of trees half obscured by a hill, I could see the torches burning on both sides. The plain between Lord Vasilik's horde and Anset-de's mounted army suddenly seemed much smaller than it had before.

Anticipation hung like spreading frost crystals, and I could've sworn I felt a tug of power, like a residue of the dancing, weaving through the air. I knew Lord Vasilik rode out at the front, the medallion dangling onto his chest, Asa beside him. The plan was simple; while his generals fought to win, he would search out Anset-de. Opposite, I couldn't make out Anset-de, but suspected he also rode in front of his men. Everyone watched, ready for the raised hands, drums, and horns, that would signal the attack.

I ran my tongue across my teeth, swallowing for the hundredth time, gripped the strap of my bag more tightly. Everything was ready. Hepsiba stood against a tree a few feet away, watching for anything to go wrong. We all agreed that Anset-de was likely to try and have me killed, but that it would be a breach of the prophesied "fair fight" for me to try and destroy the wolf before the battle began.

A horn blew, and I heard the air-stilling thrum of bows being released. A roar grew in the wake of hissing arrows, men on both sides raising their voices. The front lines surged forward.

Now.

I drew my knife, dug it into the snow and drew the semblance of the circle. Maybe, as the dead man and the voice had said, I didn't need it, but I wasn't going to chance it with the wolf. Out of the bag I pulled a candle, set it up before me, shoving its base into the snow. My fingers were growing numb, causing me to strike the flint too hard and lose it in the snow. Cursing, I

picked it up and tried again. The echoing horns blew, signaling the next wave. I looked up, saw the pure chaos of bodies through the gap between two trunks. The screaming began in earnest. Hepsiba watched, body tense, splitting her attention between me and the battle.

Finally, I struck a flame to life. “Dark gods,” I whispered, “please let this work.”

From the depths of the bag, I pulled out the tuft of fur. It seemed to howl in my palm, murderously angry. I again stared at the battle, believing one of the moving shapes was Anset-de with the skin draped over his skull. Swallowing one more time, I pressed my left hand into the snow for stability, and held the black tuft over the candle flame.

This was what I was willing to do.

I relaxed, letting my senses wander outward to the battle...and deliberately saw death.

Mists rose around the roiling violence, and a stillness settled, all the pain becoming distant. Silver paths twined across the ground, and I knew I’d found my doorway. I drew in a breath and called to the wolf.

The fur caught fire.

Anguished howling shattered the stillness, rising around me from every direction, blasting as a gale wind. The candle guttered out. A darkness like a void appeared in the mists, and the wolf was suddenly there, so large it blocked my view of anything else. Snarling, it paced around me, unable to cross the circle I’d drawn. I breathed in relief. Its body stretched and morphed into monstrous shapes, only the eyes remaining the same, as though even here they were made of smooth pebbles.

Dark gods, it was powerful.

Witch boy? the boy’s whisper held a note of uncertainty, even fear.

I'd wondered if they'd show up again, but right now I dared not take my eyes from the prowling wolf. The bones had read for justice and judgement, power and pain, death and defeat. Praying I was not about to make a fatal mistake, I stood up and stepped out of my circle.

From somewhere far away I thought I heard Hepsiba shout. The wolf threw itself at me, insubstantiality engulfing my body until all I saw was black nothing.

Kill you! Eat you! Not fair!! My every nerve rang with the force of the wolf's anguish, and I lost my balance, tumbling to the ground, then down and down. The wolf's death abruptly materialized.

The man had chased him for weeks, then months. It had been a good hunt, each outsmarting the other until one day, as must always eventually happen, the wolf lost. It was acceptable. But the man hadn't killed him, he had taken and caged him instead, displayed him before other men, until the wolf grew thin. Weak. Only then did the man kill him, and then build another cage with the skin. This time, there was no release. The man needed him, used him. He couldn't kill him. Why?

"We will kill him," I promised into the emptiness.

The eyes appeared, the darkness condensing down until the wolf crouched before me, large, black, sleek, and very much alive, regarding me with teeth exposed. He didn't believe me, but he didn't attack me.

At his feet I could see filaments of power circling the paws, running outward into the nothing around us. I inched forward, my knees displacing snow I couldn't see. The wolf lowered his head and growled.

I stopped, not wanting to lose a hand, if that was possible here. The filaments were the problem, they felt different from the wolf, just as the circle's power had felt different from the dead man's doorway. How to convince the animal to let me get close...

Power, judgement, death.

“I offer death,” I said, holding up my knife. “Real death.”

The wolf snarled and lunged, snapping for my throat. I rolled away, coming to rest beside one of the trailing tendrils. Without thinking, I slashed at it and it split. The wolf yelped, then came at me again. I scrambled away toward another filament, barely avoiding teeth. I cut it in two. This time the wolf paused, whining, and I took advantage to find and slice three more of the filaments. The feeling of something unraveling boiled up, the wolf’s shape distorted, and the howl carried something different. A wildness it hadn’t had before. A filament snapped on its own, then another. The wolf shuddered, shaking himself and shedding the rest of Anset-de’s power.

I fell back from it, holding my knife ready should he still decide to try and eat me. Instead, he threw back his head and howled as it would have in life.

Two blond faces emerged out of the darkness to stare at me in astonishment. I hadn’t forgotten about them. I levered myself up to my feet, put away my knife, then held out my hands to them. “I can make this right,” I said. “I tell fortunes, and yours isn’t to stay here.”

The boy cast an almost fearful glance at the girl, bit his lip and tentatively reached out and touched my hand. It was like holding ice that wanted to crawl into my skin. The girl scowled, skeptical, but eventually took my other hand. I wondered if I could get frostbite.

The mists were back, orienting my sense of direction. We turned to the line of dark trees, and I looked down to the wolf who was there beside me as well. Without speaking, we walked right up to the towering, intimidating forest. Even this close, it appeared impenetrable, except for three silver paths weaving past the trunks and on into a blue darkness. I looked down. My feet remained on snow, but the wolf and the youths walked on their own paths.

“That’s your fortune,” I said, letting go of their hands.

The wolf didn't hesitate, bounding between a tall pine and maple and vanishing.

The boy gave me a tentative smile, looked to the girl one more time, before following the wolf. Their frosted paths faded into the mist.

Witch boy, the girl said, still with a bit of resentment.

"Witch boy," I agreed, still wondering why she hated me. I wasn't sure why I said what I did next, "I'm sorry your fortune wasn't different."

Her eyes flashed, cheeks reddening. She turned away from me, and a moment later, she was gone too.

"Curi!" Hepsiba's anxious voice carried from somewhere behind.

I didn't want to turn. There was something compelling about the trees, the idea of what they might hide...

"Curi!" Panicked now, and I felt hands grab my shoulders and shake them.

I gasped in a breath and was suddenly on my back with Hepsiba inches away from my face, a tiny streak of blood on her forehead.

"It's gone," I said. "The wolf is gone."

"And you nearly were too," she said, sitting back and dropping my shoulders.

"I..." I pointed at the blood on her forehead. "What happened?"

"You broke your circle, then fell over on your back and stopped breathing," she said angrily.

"And you sort of...faded in and out. It wasn't right."

"Oh," I looked at the circle, now trampled in many places, and caught sight of more blood and a body slumped at the base of a sapling. I looked back at Hepsiba.

"And a few of Anset-de's people found us," she waved her part in keeping me alive away as if it was just a cup of tea. "You could have warned me," she scolded.

“I had to prove to the wolf that I was stronger, meet it on equal footing. It wouldn’t have moved on otherwise.” I got to my knees, muscles straining like I really had just been in a fight. “I didn’t know I’d quit breathing.” I paused. “I faded?”

“Yes, like you were only half here and half...wherever you went,” she said, arms crossed tightly over her breasts.

“I don’t...” I frowned. “I’ve no answer for that.”

She still wasn’t happy, but she stood and offered me a hand up. “We need to move. It wouldn’t surprise me if Anset-de has others coming to see why his men haven’t come back from killing you. You can figure out why you nearly died after we’re away from here.”

I shuffled around gathering up the candle and flint, and shoved them into the bag. My knife was safely sheathed. As I straightened and stretched, everything hurt. I staggered after her like an old man. She made no comment, just made sure I didn’t fall while scouting for trouble. From what I could hear and see, the battle was no longer concentrated in an organized line, but had spread outward, like what happened when an ant hill was stepped on.

We crouched low, skirting behind the carnage and making our discreet way back to the tents. At least, that was the plan. A powerful pulse of sorcery echoed across the snow, knocking me to my knees. Hepsiba instantly had hold of my arm.

“What is it?” she asked, scanning over our heads for trouble.

“He’s found Anset-de,” I said.

“Then it should be over soon,” she said.

It should... Why didn’t I think it would be? What was I willing to do?

I stood up and began heading towards the battle.

“Curi,” Hepsiba caught my arm. “His orders were to go back to the tents.”

“I know,” I pulled away, kept going. “But that’s not where I need to be.”

“Is this one of your premonitions?” she asked warily, coming after me.

“I don’t know,” was all the answer I could give her.

Breathing curses, we crossed the edges of the field where the fighting had moved on. Despite the stiffness in my limbs, my training as a runner came back to me. I moved from body to body, staying down and as hidden as possible, aware of everything in all directions.

Just on the verge of the fighting, we dropped behind the bulky mound of a dead horse, our backs pressed to the saddle. Hepsiba motioned for me to stay down while she peered over the animals’ flank. An arrow whizzed over our heads.

“Do you see them?” I asked her.

“No,” she slid back down, “but we’ve been seen.”

I already had the bag secured across my shoulders. “Don’t worry. I know where they are. I’ll run; you watch my back?”

“You do?” she asked, pulling her blade out.

I shrugged, I didn’t know how I knew, and there was no time to assess it.

She bared her teeth in what could have been a smile. I touched my index finger to my forehead, drew a circle and single line, and whispered, “don’t see me.” Hepsiba gave me a funny look.

My leap over the dead horse’s neck and legs startled the shaggy man intent on running his spear through us. He wheeled back with a shout, and never even saw Hepsiba.

I ran into the dense maw of the fighting.

Single minded, that was how you made it as a runner. You didn't worry about who was on which side, didn't think of the carnage and violence around you except as an obstacle to be circumvented. Only after could you think of it, only after you delivered your message did you stop.

Don't see me, I thought over and over.

Two men swung into my way, locked in a struggle for a single axe. The taller twisted a foot behind the other's and they both went down. I spun around them, ducking another pair of swinging swords.

One of Anset-de's men intercepted my path, screaming and swinging his blade. There was blood across his face and beard, making his teeth too white. In less than five minutes, someone would put an axe in his breastbone. I dodged to the side and rolled around to his back, then sprinted between two other men.

A rider pitched from his horse as it skidded in the red mud, forcing me to throw myself backwards. I lost my balance, used the momentum to roll between a set of sprawled bodies, and come to my feet. The rider wouldn't die until infection set in a week from now.

It was then that I saw Lord Vasilik, still on horseback, swinging his curved sword. Anset-de circled him, teeth bared in a snarl to match the dead wolf's hide on his head. No one was close by, all the fighting in a giant ring around them, and as I got closer, I saw the invisible line of a sorcerer's circle laid on the ground.

I dropped down against the still warm belly of a horse. Two of Anset-de's men lay dead a few feet from me. One of them the man who lost an eye, the spear shaft sticking up like a dull, stiff flower.

What was I doing here?

Looking over the horse's back, Lord Vasilik appeared to have everything in hand. Anset-de was tiring. Pulling on the reins, he sidestepped his nimbler horse away just as Lord Vasilik swung down, the blade nicking the wolf skin's ear. He seemed to be trying to use the charms around his neck to shield himself. Lord Vasilik charged his horse forward, intending to ram into the other beast. He used no sorcery.

A growl from behind me stopped me. I didn't dare look as I felt the dead horse shift as its legs were moved aside. Hot breath hit my head.

"Asa," I said, "please tell me that's you." I had no idea where Hepsiba was.

Two giant paws came to rest on the horse's rump and a large, shaggy head entered my field of vision. A bear, so large his shoulders would've been level with Lord Vasilik's warhorse. In the torchlit darkness, standing over the mixture of snow, blood, and trampled earth, he could've been one of the Darker demons come to eat souls. I realized how two of Anset-de's men were torn apart.

He shook his head at me, grunting.

"I was headed back," I began, but he shook his head. With a paw bigger than my head he gestured fiercely at the warlords, rumbling in concern. I looked again.

Anset-de blocked another swipe from Lord Vasilik, and this time there was a reverberation in the air, as though two forces rebounded off a wall. The circle.

"Dark gods," I said to Asa. "It's Anset-de's circle, isn't it?"

He growled, nodding his head.

So, that was why.

I pulled the bag off my back, dug in it for the candle and flint.

"Cover me," I said to Asa, and stood up, leaving the bag on the ground.

Overshadowed by the bear, I approached the line of the circle, felt it grate against me as I came closer, repelling. *Don't see me*, I thought, reaching out a hand and almost touching the power emanating up from the line. Hoping it worked a second time, I took a step into the circle.

It felt like walking into an echo. Tendrils of power spiraled everywhere, both warlords' sorcery tangling over and over. It was similar to the sorcery of Lord Vasilik's dancing circle, but instead of weaving a harmonious pattern, their sorcery clashed like snakes trying to eat each other. Anything the other tried to do was canceled out.

Staying close to the circle's edge, Asa staring at me and pacing in agitation, I jammed the candle into the snow, struck the flint and held the flame to the wick. I stuck my finger into the snow at the base of the candle and slowly shuffled backwards until I was again outside the circle, pulling a line in the ground with me. Small tendrils of their power leaked out.

Finger still buried; I said the first word that came to mind. "Break."

I didn't know if the snap of the circle collapsing was audible, but it was palpable as a dam being released, the antagonistic power exploding outward. I fell onto my back.

With a cry that had me instantly trying to get back up, Anset-de fell off his horse. Asa jumped over me and chased after the small horse. Lord Vasilik circled his rival. Rolling to his feet, Anset-de went for the warhorse's legs at the same time Lord Vasilik swiped down with his blade. Metal screeched as Anset-de swung his own blade up. He wasn't quite in time to prevent the dead man's blade from cutting into his shoulder, the momentum sending him stumbling back down to his knees.

"You are beaten," Lord Vasilik said.

“Only because of your possessed witch,” Anset-de spat. He pointed in my direction. I crawled backwards into the dead horse, the pure hatred in his voice feeling like a curse he could still place on me.

“We agreed to the use of all our resources once the battle began,” Lord Vasilik dismounted to stand over the horseman. “Did you not have your witches cast spells upon my men? Were we not just using sorcery?”

Anset-de laughed harshly, slumping with the pain of his shoulder. Lord Vasilik held up his sword to Anset-de’s charm laden throat.

“Do you concede that I have proven I’m Vasilik Reborn, and that my forces are favored of the gods?”

Painfully, Anset-de cast his eyes about the field, taking in his dead, then he turned to the sky and the observing stars. The moon had finally risen, her light soft in the harsh night. Blood dripping, he finally bowed his head to Lord Vasilik.

“The gods have favored you. I concede.” He spread unwavering hands up to the moon.

Lord Vasilik aligned his sword and ran him through.

The warlord fell back to lie on the ground, the wolf skin falling from his head, and life spreading red around him. Lord Vasilik reached to his chest and drew out the silver medallion, pulling it over his head to dangle like a pendulum over Anset-de’s body. With his sword, he smeared a touch of Anset-de’s blood across the silver circles, and set the medallion swaying. Then he began to chant.

Sorcery wove around and around his hands, matching the sing-song rhythm of the words and the swaying silver. Beneath its influence, Anset-de’s breath stuttered, not quite dead. I hugged my legs to my chest, perversely fascinated and repulsed by the dead man’s skill. I felt when his

power took effect, winding down the medallion's chain, filling in the circles, then moving in waves through the air like an expanding mist. It brushed my face, my frozen fingers and moved on, dismissing me as not what it sought. I shivered, it felt very different from the frosted fog in death, more like Lord Vasilik himself. Wrong. Some of it drifted down onto Anset-de's chest, and he gasped in a wet breath.

The chanting went on, the sorcery's outward movement taking its time, searching, and wrapping about every one of Anset-de's people like a spider casting a web. A hush spread, cries and screams dying away as if the air demanded quiet.

However, beneath the stillness a tension built, a tightening like the charge in the air before lightning struck the earth. Lord Vasilik's hand trembled, the medallion swaying in smaller and smaller passes, drawing everything closer and closer until...

The medallion stopped swinging.

The silence roared, all the air rushing back like a tide crashing back from the shore. I felt myself pulled forward, and roughly dug my feet deeper into the bloody snow. I wanted to scream, feeling like claws dragged through my very being.

Anset-de screamed, the sorcery overlaying his body digging in like worms only to rip him from his body. More screams rose and joined with their defeated warlord's howl as Lord Vasilik's sorcery tore them from their rightful place in death and into the medallion.

Then, absolute silence. Anset-de stared sightlessly at the sky. Lord Vasilik lowered the medallion, the light of the moon somehow reflecting on it differently. He held it in his hand, turned it over several times, smiling.

I blinked, saw a few tendrils of frosted mist gliding along the ground behind him. A pale figure marked with Dark symbols watched the dead man, lip curled in disgust. I knew him. He

looked at me and quietly smiled. I blinked again, and he was gone. With a sigh, I dropped my head to my knees, tasted blood. My nose was bleeding.

I tilted my head back, tensed when I heard his boots crunching over to me, and kept my eyes on the stars.

“Well done,” he said, then mounted his horse and left me there. I closed my eyes for a moment.

Hepsiba’s hand on my arm woke me up. I was so cold. My nose made her frown, and she handed me a rag from her pocket to press against it. She made me uncurl from my stiff position, cursorily ran her hands over me to check for any injury, and then sat down next to me with a sigh.

“You were hard to see,” she said, accusingly. “How do you do it?”

It took me a moment to understand what she meant, then remembered how she’d looked at me when I took off running. “Oh, that’s just something I picked up a long time ago. I wish not to be seen, trace the rune, and it seems to work.”

“Huh,” she frowned. “Because you didn’t fade, you just were difficult to concentrate on.”

I started to move, looking out over the destruction. Anset-de’s body remained, minus a sword in its chest. He continued to stare at the sky, as though pleading with the moon. The wolf skin lay half caught under his body. I got up, stiffly walked over to the body, and jerked at the skin until it was free. I spread it out on a clear patch of ground, brushing my fingers over the hide to smooth it down. Satisfied, I returned to Hepsiba, who sat watching me with one of her understanding looks. I was glad she said nothing as I gathered up the candle, flint, and bag. Slowly, we started our walk back to the tents.

The huffing of a living horse caused me to turn, and Hepsiba to smile. Asa, wholly man again, brought his giant beast close and held out a hand.

“Come on, we’ll all fit,” he said.

Hepsiba took his hand and let him heave her up. She swung a leg over the horse’s rump and situated herself against Asa’s back. My turn, but I hesitated. Even on that horse, it would be tight.

“Don’t make me get down,” Asa sighed.

It was tight, but not as bad as I thought, and Asa kept the pace nice and easy. The only real difficulty for me was not falling back to sleep.

Chapter 10

Over the next five days, the horde burned the dead and celebrated. I ran away.

It was only as far as an untouched copse of trees beyond where Anset-de's army had camped, but still far enough that I couldn't constantly hear the shouts of "Vasilik Reborn!" or smell the burning. He knew where I was.

Half the time I slept, curled up in the tent I'd taken from Hepsiba. The other half, I walked, picking rabbit tracks to follow, and frequently doubling back on my own. Just as evening fell on the fourth day, I came across a dead rabbit, birds picking away at red-frosted bits still stuck to the bones. I thought I saw mists curling away from it.

The same thing had kept on happening ever since the battle. The entire plain full of bodies frosted over with lazy mists that I knew weren't there, and blinking didn't always make it go away. And I was still stiff, like I'd grown old overnight, or as if my body strained to be in two places at once.

The black birds spooked as I drew level with the rabbit's corpse. They protested loudly at the interruption, circling a few feet above my head, especially when I bent down and cut away some of the frozen fur. Once I was far enough away, they landed and resumed their meal.

I gathered up some downed branches to add to my collection and crunched through the snow back to my hiding place. I lit a fire, spread an oiled blanket between it and the tent, and eased down to sit cross legged. The warmth was good, but it still didn't get rid of the chill that seemed to have settled inside my bones. I knew I couldn't let it continue.

From my pack, I pulled out a wooden figurine, set it before the fire, and laid the rabbit fur before it. I watched it, letting the firelight give it a semblance of movement. The Harvester's red

painted eyes became their own flames. Frost formed along the edges of the fur, threads of mist appearing around it.

I closed my eyes, waited for the snapping of the fire to fade, then opened them. The Dark misted fields spread around me, the forest line towering behind me. I got to my feet, less stiff than before, and turned around. At its base, the pine tree before me spread wider than the dead man's tents, its lower branches longer than most normal trees were tall. I felt it watched me as I walked around its roots until I was close enough to press a hand against its trunk.

It was like touching gravity, anchored to the bedrock that made up the world, and for a moment, everything settled, my feet rooted in the same earth... I wondered if it was like this on the other side of the trees.

"I wouldn't," the disembodied voice said.

I retracted my hand from the smooth, old bark, and slowly turned towards the voice. This time, he didn't hide.

The Harvester looked exactly as he did in my dreams, exactly as he had when the priest's summoning had half worked. Red eyes, sometimes shadowed black, near white hair and skin marked with black runes, and bare feet. He held a rabbit cradled against his chest, one hand rubbing its ears.

"Why?" I asked.

"Why do you think?" he asked, looking at my feet and where I stood on dark earth. There was no path.

Silently, I wondered what would happen if I tried anyway, if he would stop me, or if the trees simply wouldn't let me through.

"You called me here for a reason," he said. "Let's have it."

“You made me prophesy,” I said, trying not to sound angry and resentful. “Why? Don’t you get enough death without making it happen?”

“That bothers you?” he widened his eyes.

“Will you just answer me!”

His expression grew cold, hand stilling on the rabbit’s head. Although there was no sound in this place, everything seemed to grow even more quiet, attentive to how their god would react.

“I have my reasons,” he said. “Let’s just say, lessons need to be learned.”

“And you’ll use me to do it?” I asked.

“If I recall, you weren’t so objectionable back when you were bleeding on my altar.”

That shut me up, flashes of memory binding my tongue. My wrists throbbed in imaginary pain, the priest’s voice grating in my ears, and another voice in my head asking me what I wanted. The Harvester’s voice.

“I fulfilled your request, and then I went away, as you asked, didn’t I? We’re now even.” the god said.

I couldn’t answer.

He turned his attention to the rabbit in his arms, giving it a few final strokes. Crouching, he set it down on the ground. Frosted mist formed on the ground around it, elongating into a line around the roots of the giant pine and into the woods. Its ears came up, nose fluttering as something caught its attention, and it hopped over the roots and into the trees, feet never leaving the silver path.

The Harvester watched it go, then returned to me.

“This is pointless,” he said. “I have answered you. Now ask me what you really want to know. Ask about your bargain with Vasilik.” He twisted the name around like a curse.

I sucked in a breath, suddenly was afraid to ask, but... “How do I make him immortal?”

“In the same time and place as his death. The rest, I think you know, after freeing the wolf.”

Surprised, I stared at him, unsure if I should believe such a straightforward answer.

He grinned, showing teeth like a predator. “I have my reasons. And one more question for you, Curi. In the end, what will you choose to do?” he asked.

I opened my eyes to a cold fire and the rabbit fur gone. I looked at the figurine, felt an urgent need to pick it up and throw it. Once it was in my hand, I couldn’t do it, and shoved it back in my pack instead, realizing all my stiffness was gone.

Chapter 11

Another month passed, and Bright spring finally began battling winter's hold, bringing warm sun between fits and bursts of snow and rain. The horde churned new grasses into mud slicks, and across the plains lands of Anset-de's former territory repairs to wagons became a constant struggle as they continued to mire and break.

Lord Vasilik announced it was time to march on Warlord Igan's lands, and the horde turned north in good spirits.

A week later, soldiers began dying in their sleep.

"It's not human, whatever it is," I said looking at the bones on the rug before me. Lord Vasilik, Asa, General Gostle, and General Felix surrounded me.

"Nothing else?" Lord Vasilik asked.

I shook my head, pointing to different bones in turn. "These give more a sense of something rather than someone. But it is in the camp."

"Where?" Felix asked.

"Don't know," I said.

Gostle sat back in frustration. "So, what good did this do?"

"We know, Gostle," Lord Vasilik hardened his voice, "that we cannot just kill it. We will have to use sorcery."

Flushing, Gostle bowed his head.

The dead man sighed. "Of all times... Felix, Gostle, spread the word to the others. Have a watch for every hundred men and set charms. If you have any with witching or sorcery, even a small amount, keep watch on them, and enlist their help. Meanwhile, I'll do some looking myself."

Respectfully bowing, both generals left though the front of the tent. I heard Gostle begin speaking the moment the flap closed.

“It’s too convenient,” Asa said.

“Yes,” Lord Vasilik agreed. “Which makes me think it might be Igan’s doing, even though I thought I’d found all his spies.”

I gathered up the bones and replaced them in the bag. At the same time, Hepsiba came through the back.

“Short report on the state of the rumor mill, they’re nervous,” she said, sliding onto a stool beside Asa. “It’s all anyone can talk about, although mostly they worry it’s a sickness. Protection charms are becoming quite popular.” She held one up on a leather string round her neck. I wrinkled my nose, if it meant to be a protection charm, it wasn’t very good. “I’d guess we’ve got about three days before we start seeing more serious complaints.”

“They need a fight,” Lord Vasilik said. “But I just had a report that Haga is deserted. Everyone’s pulled out and gone. Even the soldiers.”

“Well,” Hepsiba began carefully, “They did know we were coming. Igan can afford to lose a few towns, and by now everyone’s heard that Anset-de’s people vanished and now you are Lord.”

Lord Vasilik nodded. “Logical as always, Hepsiba. One problem at a time.” He pulled out the medallion from where he wore it under his vest. “We’ll place some extra sentries around. If our problem is not human, then a non-human watch is also logical.”

I don’t think he noticed Hepsiba’s trepidation as she watched the silver catch the light.

After returning the bones to my room and pulling on my coat against the still wintry night air, I followed Asa out to his horse. Lord Vasilik wanted some living eyes out riding around and

not just the ghosts he'd send out. Asa asked to take me, saying I might see something he couldn't. Lord Vasilik agreed.

Asa mounted, and held the beast steady as I found the stirrup, took his hand, and hoisted myself up into the back end of the saddle. He saluted to Hepsiba who waved back, then disappeared to take her fox shape and wander around between tents.

We reached the outer edges of the camp and turned to head towards the trailing end of the horde. I wrapped a hand around the strap fitted into the saddle and squeezed with my legs to keep from bouncing my brains out as we picked up speed.

"Why the hurry?" I asked.

"Why not?" he asked back over his shoulder.

I leaned closer to his back as he gave the horse its head and we sped up to a full gallop. The wind tore at my coat sleeves. Asa laughed, the sound whipping by me as a roar. I smiled.

When we slowed back down to a walk, the horde was still a solid line to our right. We were only about half way down the length of the leviathan like camp.

"You did that just to make me practice holding on, didn't you?" I accused, adjusting my seat, and loosening my death-grip on the strap.

"Well," he flashed a grin, "you never know what could happen. I don't want you thrown."

I had to agree with his reasoning, although I still glared at him.

"So, where are we going?" I asked. Generally, he didn't ask me to ride with him except for a specific reason.

"There's something that's been bothering me ever since we found the first man dead. I'm hoping you can help."

I frowned. "What is it?"

He shook his head. “I don’t want to color your opinion, so let’s just say that I think something is following us, but I’ve never actually seen it.”

“And you think I can?”

“Maybe,” he said.

“Why haven’t you told him?”

“Until tonight, I thought it likely to be an animal. You’ve got some weird ones up here in the north, like those fanged deer, and that big cat that I swear can disappear into thin air. No scent at all. Now, I’m not so sure.” He swung the horse towards a line of forest running parallel to the horde.

As we passed under the trees, we slowed, impeded by the thick trunks and clawing branches. We rode in silence, listening to the creaking of wood and small skittering of disturbed wildlife. I looked around in the dark, clouds having won the fight for the sky. If not for the leftover patches of snow and the distant glow of torches, I would’ve been completely blind.

“You know my eyes aren’t like yours,” I reminded. “I can’t see in the dark.”

“I know,” he said, patting my knee with his giant hand.

We kept on, Asa expertly maneuvering the horse deeper into the woods until I couldn’t see any lights. I looked up at the slightly lighter grey-black of the clouds above the gnarled fingers of the trees and back down to Asa’s coat.

The horse stopped moving, and Asa tapped my left knee. I turned that way, saw nothing but the dark trees and snow, but something was there. Every nerve in my body tensed with the awareness of being watched. Instinctively, my eyes flitted from tree trunk to tree trunk, every dark bulge becoming a hidden threat. I didn’t move. Asa held the horse still, but even it seemed to know something was out there and didn’t shift its weight. I tightened my hold on the saddle, just in case.

A hiss suddenly echoed around us. The horse startled, and I held on, grabbing for Asa's belt as well. Whatever watched us was gone.

The trees groaned in relief.

"That," Asa brought the horse back under control.

"I didn't see anything," I whispered. "It was watching us."

"Yep," he agreed. "But that's the first time I've heard it."

"Is it still..."

"It's gone now, and I can't track it," he said with irritation. "There's nothing to track." He turned the horse and headed back the way we'd come.

I couldn't help glancing from side to side, my fingers still in a death grip. The middle of my back itched, conjuring up the idea that it was behind us. I turned slowly in the saddle to assure myself I was only twitchy.

A shadow moved between two trees, black against a patch of snow, following.

"Asa," I whispered, not daring to turn away, hoping he heard me. "I see it."

His big hand patted my knee and stayed there. The horse stopped moving. The shadow faded into the trees.

"Keep going," I told him, watching the spot where it had last been.

Asa urged the horse back into motion. The shadow separated from the others, moving with us. Steadily, we worked our way back toward the horde, whatever it was keeping pace.

I squinted in the darkness, nearly losing it every time we swerved around a tree trunk or bush, but never entirely. Just when I thought I was staring at the wrong black pillar, its silhouette would expand, bulging outward like a growth, detach and reattach to another tree.

It wanted me to see it. I sucked in a breath, blinked, and then saw more than shadows. It was human...and not; it was here following behind us...and not. I couldn't tell which was real. It was dead, and alive, but like both at once, rather than brought back like Lord Vasilik. I tried to relax, opened myself up to deliberately witness if it had a death...

A blinding pain stabbed behind my eyes.

I jerked, biting back a cry, spun away from it and buried my face in Asa's back.

"Curi?" Asa asked, loud and sharp.

"Go!" I growled, eyes tight shut and fighting afterimages.

He didn't argue, spurred the horse forward, and I held on tightly as we wove at a dangerous speed out of the trees.

"You are sure it was dead?" Lord Vasilik questioned.

"Yes, and no," I said for the third time, exasperated. I sat before the brazier, the dead man across from me. Asa stood to the side. "Not like..." I caught myself. "It was like something dead living in something alive. Like a leech or something."

The dead man pulled back, wary disbelief creasing his forehead. "A leech." Abruptly, he stood up, disappearing into his own rooms.

I looked at Asa, confused, he mirrored my expression, adding a shrug.

A moment later, Lord Vasilik returned, carrying a book. The only other time I'd seen books, was when running a message to Maxim's priests. This one was different. He opened the spine to delicately thin pages, yellow with age, but still supple. He handled each page lightly, gently, then turned it towards me when he found what he was looking for.

"Is this what you saw?"

I looked at the image, surrounded by words I couldn't read. It was man-shaped, shadowed, but there was another image inside of the man. Like a coil of snakes, individual strands twisted and braided around, filling up the man's outline. I closed my eyes and nodded. It looked so much worse in person.

"What is it?" Asa asked, coming close enough to see the image as well.

"A leech," Lord Vasilik intoned unhappily. "I didn't think anyone even knew of them anymore, let alone could summon one. They are the closest thing you will ever find to a true Dark demon. A sorcerer who is not careful can find themselves possessed by one. Like a leech, it will live in a host and grow off his or her thoughts, emotions, blood. Eventually, the host isn't enough and they will seek out more, turning the host into a monster, and then feeding off other's dreams, or just killing them. The method depends on the leech, but death is still the end result."

"How do you kill it?" Asa asked.

Lord Vasilik looked at me, calculating. I didn't like it, realizing what was coming.

"We lure it in," he said. "Tonight."

"Gods help us," Asa said, and went to find Hepsiba.

"Never," Lord Vasilik said, once we were alone, "mention what you know of my death to anyone."

"Didn't plan on it," I replied, then asked without thinking. "What's so different between a feeder and a leech?"

He smiled stonily. "I'm in my own body. And leeches were never alive to begin with."

I changed the subject. "As the bait, what's my job?"

"Since it let you see it, it is likely curious and will want to get close. Treat it like Anset-de's wolf. Asa, Hepsiba and I will kill the host, and make sure it doesn't kill you."

I nodded. There was no point arguing.

Back in the woods, I sat on the driest patch of grass I could find, waiting for the leech to show up. Hidden to my left was Hepsiba, to my right, Asa. Directly across from me between two trees, was Lord Vasilik. He had me light a candle and place it before me in the dirt, and I could tell he'd drawn a circle around himself, just as I had drawn one around myself and the candle. Some of his sorcery trickled into and supplemented the power in my circle. The hope was that the leech would be even more curious.

Lord Vasilik had been very specific that a leech had to be contained on both a physical and sorcerous front, otherwise, it would either switch hosts, or the host would overpower us.

We waited. Long enough for some of the wildlife to grow accustomed to us and go about their business. I noticed little threads of frost emerging from under a snow pile. Whatever animal had died there had been recent. I looked up at the clouds, still covering the sky. The candle burned low, and I dug a funnel into the wax, relieving the drowning wick and letting the hot wax flood down onto the ground.

Then all sound stopped. The hairs on the back of my neck shivered, and I felt it watching me. Hands clenched on my knees, I held still, letting it come closer and easier for me to reach out to it.

It hissed, words that sounded like they hated me.

Hepsiba screamed, and something crunched.

I jumped up, knocking over the candle and it went out. At the same time, Asa roared and Lord Vasilik cursed. Like a wild bear, Asa crashed through the undergrowth to get to Hepsiba, I followed the sounds, and nearly ran into them.

“What happened?” I asked frantically.

Lord Vasilik brought his candle and held it high. There was blood, and Asa crouched over her protectively.

She wasn’t dead. I knew that. That didn’t mean she wasn’t badly hurt.

“Get her back, Asa,” Lord Vasilik said coldly. “Curi and I will be along.”

I couldn’t see what was wrong with her as Asa scooped her up and ran.

“It knew,” the dead man said angrily.

“How?” I asked.

“That is the question, isn’t it?” he turned his reflective eyes on me.

Asa’s horse was gone, and so I had to ride behind Lord Vasilik. I didn’t dare put my arm around him when he kicked the horse into an easy canter, and gripped the back of the saddle so tightly, the worked design imprinted on my palms.

He stopped half way along the line of tents, guiding his horse through to General Felix’s tent.

“Stay here,” he told me, dismounting and leaving me to slide off and ignore the stares of the soldiers still awake. None of them would die tonight.

I stared at the horse’s hooves. Closing my eyes left me thinking of Hepsiba’s blood, the tiny whimper she’d made when Asa picked her up. I felt sick.

How had the leech known? The only one’s privy to the impromptu plan had been the four of us. Why had it gone for her and not the rest of us? I bit my lip.

Dark gods, I wished he’d hurry up. Maybe I could find another horse and go on my own.

Lord Vasilik emerged from the tent, as coldly angry as when he entered. I quickly mounted behind him and said nothing.

It seemed an eternity before we made it back to the tent, and I slipped down before the horse had even completely halted. Lord Vasilik said nothing, but followed me inside.

“Asa?” I called as soon as I entered, heading for the side room he and Hepsiba shared. The flap pulled aside just as I reached it. Asa stared down at me, a protective bear in man form. I stepped back, turning my head unfrontationally. “How is she?”

His breath shuddered out of him, and he became more man. “Not good.”

“She won’t die,” I said quietly.

He nodded.

“Good,” Lord Vasilik said from behind me. “She is not a loss I planned for.”

Asa stiffened, but bowed.

“We’ll try again tomorrow,” the dead man said, and stalked to his own rooms.

I looked up at Asa, his face blank as he stared at the dead man’s doorway. Eventually, he dropped his eyes to me, grimaced more than smiled, and retreated into the room, leaving me alone.

I meandered over to the brazier, picking up a candle on my way. I held it over the coals until the wick caught. I let the wax drip and sizzle a bit before tilting the candle upright, then retreated to my own room.

Placing the candle down on a low bench I’d acquired as a table, I pulled out my pack and dug in it for the god figurine. The red paint watched me resentfully as I set it down before the candle. I had nothing dead on me, except for a few wilting snowdrops Hepsiba had found and I hadn’t gotten around to doing anything with. They would have to do.

Kneeling, I measured my breathing and watched the little flame flickering behind the statue. I smiled when frost covered the snowdrops.

“This is not a good habit,” the Harvester chided.

I turned, relieved. “There’s a leech.”

Carefully, he brought the snowdrop up to his lips and breathed in their scent. “I know. So, what are you doing about it, little necromancer? Why should you care?”

“It attacked my...” I stumbled over the last word, “friend.”

“Ah. She’s your friend?” he smiled as if I’d told him a secret.

I shook my head. “I don’t know how to get rid of it.”

“What you feel for your friend, or the leech?”

“The leech, damn it!”

He frowned. “Oh, take a joke. You’re lucky I like you.”

I took a deep breath, reminding myself I spoke to a god.

“How do I get rid of the leech?”

“Her,” he said, suddenly more serious than I’d ever seen him. “How do you get rid of her.”

Her? I didn’t know why, but that reconfigured things in my head.

“Her name was Inna.” He watched me. “Do you even know what a leech is?”

I shook my head. “I only learned about them tonight.”

“Hmm, well, leeches tried to skip over life and pass over death. It didn’t work. All they can do it hitch a ride now. Makes them bitter as snowdrops.” He held out the flower to me.

I took it. “So, what do I do?”

“Find her host. Bring her here like you did the wolf.”

“I intend to,” I said, bowing.

He chuckled. “Do you know what you’re going to do yet?”

I turned away from him, holding the snowdrop between two fingers, and opened my eyes to the candle. The Harvester figure smiled. I blew out the candle.

There was still the problem of finding the host...who had somehow known that we knew and set a trap for it. How? I walked out into the brazier room, threw a log onto the coals to give more light. We'd been in this room, which not even Lord Vasilik's generals entered. Unless one of us had somehow given the plan away. Hepsiba had paid for it.

Hepsiba.

I crossed the room at a run, knocked on the wooden frame post beside Asa and Hepsiba's door.

"Asa," I called urgently.

No answer.

"Asa, I think I know why it attacked Hepsiba."

The flap hit my face as Asa shoved it aside.

"Why?" he growled.

"Is she still wearing that new protection charm?"

He turned; the flap fell. I waited. Then he emerged, the charm dangling from his fist, the leather thong wove between holes in the carved wood, crudely carved runes nearly split the wood. I took it and felt it listening.

"Never mind," I said, but took it and put it around my own neck.

Asa watched me and seemed to grow larger.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Sleeping," he said. "Out of danger."

I heaved a relieved sigh. "Good."

He followed me to Lord Vasilik's rooms, where I knocked on the support pole, and waited until I heard him say, "come."

Only one lamp was lit beside the large table and chair, where he sat. Before him on the table rested the medallion, the light swirling unnaturally within the circles. He looked up, and I held up the charm, pressing a finger to my lips. His eyes narrowed.

Hastily, I walked around the table and held it out for him to touch. Understanding lit his expression, and he bared his teeth. From his place by the door, Asa barely contained a growl. He stood, picking up the medallion and placing it back around his neck, motioning me to walk ahead of him. Silently, the three of us left the tent.

I rode with Asa, holding the charm in my hand and keeping us going in the right direction. In the east, the clouds began to lighten. Those in the horde who had to be up were beginning to rise, some of them noticing their lord passing by and calling his name.

Growling, he looked over at me, clearly asking how close we were. I shook my head, and after a moment, he waved us on, turning his horse to the tents.

Sooner than I expected, the charm angled us towards the tents as well. This would have been easier in the woods. But we couldn't stop now. Asa pulled his horse to a slower pace as we neared the outer tents, plenty of the men recognized him as well, although they didn't cheer.

Finally, I tugged on Asa's sleeve. We were there.

I leapt down, and Asa followed, leaving his horse tied alongside several others. Up close, everyone decided to give him a wide berth. Cook fires smoked, the sound of frying reminding me just how long I'd been awake and without food.

It was at the end of an officer's tent that I found the host. If the charm hadn't been around my neck, I would've thought the skinny man could barely hold his sword up. I couldn't sense

anything other than mild witching, the sort of thing that I'd expect by looking at the charm's construction. The man looked up from cleaning his armor, scowled at me warily.

"What do you want boy?" he demanded.

"Inna?" I asked, holding up the charm.

Hissing, he shot to his feet, body morphing into something huge, and bolted away, scattering his armor, and the other officers around him. Asa bounded after him. I tried to keep up, dodging debris. A whole tent blocked my way, several pegs ripped from the ground, and a soldier lay on the ground with claw marks across his gut. Three hours and he'd be dead.

I followed the sound of more screaming, and found myself joined by soldiers with weapons in hand, ready for a fight.

I rounded a corner and found Asa had brought him down. He had a knee in the man's back, pulling his arms backwards enough I thought they'd break. Two soldiers found rope and began binding the man's feet and hands. From his mouth, Inna began shouting in a language that seemed to echo over itself, and I felt the power wrapping its way around her and heading for Asa.

There wasn't time for a circle, and I did the only thing I could think of. I put a hand on the man's head, shoved it into the ground, and called to the Harvester god.

"That was quick," he said behind me. This time, I didn't turn, but my hand now pressed against the matted, black hair of a naked woman, although her body shifted, becoming less substantial, and then more like stone.

He squatted down, reached out a hand and grasped the woman by the back of her neck. She cried out, body turning a burned charcoal color, skin roiling like snakes. I let go and fell back.

"Inna," he said firmly, lips peeling back to show teeth. Without letting go, he helped her sit up. "It's time. Let the poor Fetka go."

She wailed in that other language. He responded in the same.

I backed away, my movements catching his attention. Instantly, I was back in the camp, on my back and facing Asa, who still held the man face down. A crowd began to circle us, and then became quiet, everyone looking off to my left.

Lord Vasilik walked through his soldiers, general Felix following him. I got to my feet as he approached, bowing as everyone else did.

“Asa, let him stand,” the warlord commanded.

Reluctantly, Asa did, keeping a firm hold on the man’s arms. Lord Vasilik held out a hand for the charm, and I pulled it over my head and handed it over. He held it up for all to see, then broke it in half. The man shuddered.

“This man used this charm to try and spy on me and my councils, to learn our plans. And it is he who is responsible for our men dead in their sleep.” Astonished murmurs followed the statement. “What is your name?” he addressed the man.

The man stuck out his lip defiantly.

“Fetka,” someone in the crowd supplied.

“Fetka,” Lord Vasilik said, “tell me, who do you work for?”

The man drew himself up, and stated plainly, “Lord Igan, who serves the Bright gods and has already brought peace to the north.”

“Not all the north,” Lord Vasilik countered. “He is not Vasilik Reborn. I do not condone murder outside of battle.”

A few cheers rose from the crowd.

“Would you serve me?” Lord Vasilik asked.

Fetka laughed.

“Then I am sorry. Asa...”

Asa broke his neck. The body folded over like a doll into the mud.

“Igan has shown his hand,” the warlord addressed the milling soldiers. “We must be ready, and we must take the fight to him. Only then will the north truly be at peace.”

Shouts erupted, the chant of “Vasilik Reborn!” spreading as a wave. Lord Vasilik lifted his arms along with everyone else. He shot me a look, and I realized I was the only one visibly not caught up in the rousing of moral. I pumped my fists in the air, opening my mouth without sound. There was plenty of it already.

Once the crowd dispersed, I followed Asa back to the horse. We rode in silence, and once in the tent, he immediately returned to Hepsiba. I shed my coat, and dully plodded towards my room, sleep sounding better than food.

Just as I reached the door, Lord Vasilik entered.

“Curi,” he called. I stopped and turned, straightening my shoulders. “You are now able to slip in and out of death easily.”

“I haven’t forgotten our bargain,” I said. “There’s just those few things to anchor it.” I’d told him that just as I had needed a token from the wolf, what he was asking would probably need more. The exact time and place, as well as a physical object to anchor his soul to. I didn’t tell him who gave me the information.

“It will be soon,” he said. “Once we march on Igan.”

I bowed. “I pay my debts,” I said, and finally flopped onto my bedding and slipped into oblivion.

Chapter 12

“We found it, right where you marked,” Hepsiba said, spreading a map across a table in the brazier room. She traced her finger across the colorfully drawn land and city, circling a small lake hidden between three forested hills. “It’s beautiful, and peaceful. We could tell no one had been there in a while.”

“Good,” I said, studying where she pointed and the marked trail she and Asa had followed to get there.

“It’s rough getting there,” Asa added. “That’s a deer trail we used.”

“Right,” I acknowledged, calculating in my head.

“So, why are you so interested in it?” Asa asked.

“There’s something there that Lord Vasilik wants. Apparently, it will help him with Igan,” I said, keeping my eyes on the map.

“Like a hidden treasure?” Hepsiba asked, shifting her weight with a slight wince.

“Something like that,” I nodded. “He didn’t explain it all to me.”

“So, he’s worried he might lose,” Asa guessed.

“I don’t know,” I said, although we all knew the campaign against Igan’s forces wasn’t going as well as he’d hoped.

Every town, fort, or farm holding we came across was deserted and stripped, and Lord Vasilik finally realized that Igan had barricaded himself and his people in the capital city, Molishanke. So, we marched on the city, and cut it off from any help except what they had already stored away within the walls, and buried under the inhospitable mountains at their back.

We were only twenty-eight days into the siege, but Lord Vasilik wanted a quicker solution. Igan’s initial strategy had already forced Lord Vasilik to bring in food and other goods from his

territories further afield, while Igan's lands sat dormant. A drawn-out game would drain both sides of all resources and make for hard years of recovery. Not the best start to the united reign of Vasilik Reborn.

"We should go," Asa said to me, referring to the general's council.

I sighed and stretched. Ever since the leech, I'd had to make more regular appearances before the generals. Not to give an opinion, just to stand there, and to read the bones if called to do so. Lord Vasilik's helpful witch.

"Enjoy," Hepsiba said cheerfully. We both glared at her. She grinned wickedly, rolling up the map and putting it away in a chest, then poured herself a cup of tea and made herself comfortable, all the while smiling at us. There was a slight hitch to her movements now, a tightness deep in the muscles that would take a long time to heal.

"You're going to be late," she admonished after taking a long sip.

I got up, checking for my bag of rune bones, and headed for the tent door. Asa paused to lean down, kissing the top of Hepsiba's head, before joining me.

We made it before the last general had arrived.

"A duel?" General Felix asked skeptically.

"A duel," Lord Vasilik emphasized, making it clear he'd already made his decision. "Igan, just as every lord we have defeated, desires to maintain his power, and he does not believe in the Reborn. A duel will prove, before his people and mine, who is right, and will be less costly. I have no intentions of ruling over an empire already destroyed."

"What if Igan doesn't agree?" General Etká asked hesitantly.

"Curi," the dead man motioned for me to come close, stopping Etká's concern before it could be voiced. The others leaned in to watch.

As always, I bowed to him, then to the generals, and knelt in the space before the pale, yellow rug. I tipped the bag over and held out the bones for everyone to see, waiting for the question.

“Will Igan agree to a duel?” Lord Vasilik asked clearly.

I turned my hand palm down, and let the bones fall to clatter onto the flat surface. Two bones rested parallel to each other, the others seeming to compound their meaning.

“Yes,” I said, pointing to the two runes paired as combatants.

“He will,” Lord Vasilik confirmed, leaning back in his chair. “If not, then I will use sorcery that has not been seen before.” He touched the medallion around his neck. “As I did with Anset-de.”

The generals all nodded, remembering the victory.

“Then it is settled,” Lord Vasilik said. “I will send Asa and Curi in the morning with the invitation. In three days, this siege will be over. We will have won.”

“To Vasilik Reborn,” Gostle lifted his hand in salute.

“To Vasilik Reborn!” the rest joined him.

“And what else do you read?” Lord Vasilik asked me once his generals had left, once more leaning over to look at the bones.

I pointed to the bones configured with the two. “There’s something, some factor unknown. It’s hard to tell which rune represents you, and which is Igan.”

“I was not expecting an easy victory,” the dead man said cynically.

“No,” I agreed. Igan, like Lord Vasilik, was a practicing sorcerer. “I’m saying the only thing that reads for certain is that he will agree to a duel. Nothing else.”

“Understood,” he said. “Have you found the lake?”

“Asa and Hepsiba did,” I said.

“And?”

“We didn’t do more than find it and circle the edges,” Asa chimed in, stepping forward but remaining standing. “There was an island out in the middle, but we didn’t have a way to get to it.”

“No, there wouldn’t be unless you knew how,” Lord Vasilik said. “Then we go tomorrow night, after you return from delivering my challenge to Igan.”

“What’s on the island?” Asa asked, head tilted down in respect.

The dead man smiled knowingly. “A gift that will secure my victory.”

I gathered up the bones.

Chapter 13

I rode my own horse up to the Molishanke's gates, feeling like I rode a pony compared to Asa and his giant. Asa held a pole brandishing a white flag, signaling our intentions, and watching my horsemanship with a pained expression.

"Oh-a, Molishanke," I called up to the men observing along the wall. "We are Lord Vasilik Reborn's messengers, and I come with a proposal for Lord Igan. Open the gates, so we may deliver it."

None of them moved, except to look at each other. "You going to curse us if we don't?" one of them called mockingly. He would die after being trampled by a runaway horse.

The man beside him snickered, holding up a charm and making a warding sign. "Go back to your master. He's already made his intentions clear." There was a disease in him, slowly growing until it consumed his body.

Neither Asa or I responded, but sat our horses and waited for the gate to open. The day was warm, the mud drying to rich earth. Wild grass grew against the stones of the walls, very large stones as big as Asa's horse at the base, and smaller at the top, looking like repairs rather than the original structure.

I knew Molishanke was old, as it was said to be Vasilik the Conqueror's home, but I could feel it in the stones. They were old enough to have their own ideas.

"Go on," one of the men shouted, annoyed that we were still there. His fellow hushed him, probably telling him to ignore us, and eventually we'd give up.

We didn't, even after an hour of waiting. I was grateful my horse was trained well enough not to try and wander over to the grass along the road. Then, another man appeared on the wall, a

larger insignia across his uniform. He leaned over the wall, studying us with deep frown lines that gave his mouth a perpetually grim cast. He'd die in two years, from lung problems.

"Open the gate," he instructed his men.

Astonishment made them slow, but after a minute, the large wooden gates swung wide. Waiting for us was a woman, dressed in the long, belted robes of a priestess and wise woman. Fine lines feathered around her mouth and forehead, but she showed no fear as we rode close to her.

"Please forgive the delay," she said. "We knew you were coming, but misjudged the time. My lord Igan is expecting you."

Two soldiers stepped forward from the gatehouse. "If you would dismount, your horses will be well cared for until your return."

Asa and I exchanged a glance. We hadn't expected this kind of an escort, but we dismounted, and left our horses in the hands of the soldiers. The one holding Asa's horse looked up nervously. Our guide turned and began walking up the road. We followed her, keeping a few steps behind her rod-straight back as she followed the main road up a mild incline to the large keep in the center of the city.

Curious, I couldn't help looking around, wondering what a city was like. It was clear that there were too many people for the city to hold, just as it was also clear that the residents had tried their best to make accommodations. Hundreds of leaning tents rested against homes, oiled cloth stretched between alleyways to ward off the weather. The smell was a bit overripe; bodies unable to wash due to rationing. Although the main street was deserted, I felt eyes on us, glimpsed small faces peering through windows. It was very quiet.

“We warned this street of your arrival and gave them the chance to be elsewhere if they wished. You have nothing to fear,” our guide said, as if she’d read my thoughts. She would die next year, having let herself starve.

“I’ve never been in a city,” I said. “Seems very different from a tent or a farming village.”

“Some would agree with you, yes,” she said.

Lord Igan’s keep was tall, decorative, and the great stones again formed its base. We followed the woman up five steps to the doors where she knocked. Instantly, they opened onto a great hall.

The throne Igan sat on was of carved wood, the design without embellishments. Lining the hall were tall tree trunks, replacing fallen stone columns, and soaring up to support a beamed, wooden ceiling. The walls too were patchworks of ancient stones, smaller stones, and wood. This had to have once been Vasilik the Conqueror’s hall. Swathes of colored cloths draped from the ceiling beams and fell beside the columns, creating a sense of elegance and incorporating both the old stone and new wood.

Igan’s people, at least those closest to him such as advisors and family, filled the spaces between the columns, keeping their distance from us while still directing us all their attention.

Our guide led us to the foot of Igan’s dais, bowed to him, and retreated to the side where she joined several women and a man in similar robes. I didn’t see their deaths.

Asa and I bowed at the same time, and I launched straight into our message. “Lord Igan of Molishanke, I come bearing a message from Lord Vasilik Reborn. This is day twenty-nine of his siege on your beautiful city, and he does not desire to waste his time, or yours.”

There were a few murmurs from the watching crowd, quickly silenced as I continued.

“He proposes a quicker and less costly solution. He challenges you to a duel, your strength against his. The winner becoming ruler of a united Andish empire.”

Almost as one, the crowd drew in a breath.

“A duel,” Igan repeated slowly, as if twisting it for another meaning.

“Yes, my lord,” I said. “Lord Vasilik recognizes that your sorcery is nearly as great as his own. He wishes the conflict to end. What better way than a test to prove which of you is strongest.”

“He should relinquish his claim as Vasilik returned,” Igan said.

“As he is the Reborn, he cannot. Already he has claimed almost all the northern lands, bringing peace and better trade.” I paused long enough for my words to finish reverberating around the hall. I didn’t have to believe them. “Or, his original offer still stands.”

This time, the hum of voices was distinctly unhappy. When Lord Vasilik first camped outside the city, he’d sent a message declaring he was Vasilik Reborn, returned for his throne. He demanded Igan step down willingly and become one of his ruling lords. Igan had refused.

“Your lord is not Vasilik,” Igan said with all confidence.

“Then he asks that you prove it. Defeat him and show he is lying, as he will fight for his rightful claim,” I said.

“He has such faith that the Bright and Dark gods favor him?” he said, amused.

“It is better than continuing this destructive conflict, isn’t it?” I asked back.

Igan laughed, a sour sound that was full of experience.

“Warlords breathe destruction, boy. We horde our lands like the ancient serpent gods, vindictive and self-gratifying. What does it matter if we two fight until we expend all we have? That is our might, power, and privilege, is it not? Anciently, Vasilik himself conquered the lands of the north, and was in turn conquered. It is our way.”

He watched me carefully, waiting for how I would answer. I saw his death, and it confused me.

“I think you are too wise for that, Lord Igan,” I said. “Your lands have flourished for years, and that wouldn’t have happened if you were so willing to conquer for power and your own purposes.”

Pushing against throne’s arms, he stood, still looking down at me, but perhaps with less hostility.

“What reply do I take back to my lord?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Let’s not be too reckless. Walk with me, messenger, I would speak with you alone.”

I didn’t move. Beside me, Asa bristled, shifting his weight into a ready position. Sometimes food was offered a messenger out of courtesy, but that wasn’t required. What Igan asked, to walk with him, was never done.

“No tricks,” Igan said, just as much to Asa as to me. “We keep the laws of hospitality here. If I wished to send back your bodies as my answer, it is as easily done here.”

I turned to Asa, both of us unsure. Refuse and risk offending, accept and risk being fools, but he had a point. We were at his mercy the moment we entered the gates. I stepped up to the dais, bobbing my chin in a nod. None of Igan’s people objected.

There was a door set in the wall behind the throne, looking exactly like the wall around it. Igan pushed it open, revealing a hallway, lit with a single lantern. He entered first. I glanced back to see Asa standing and scowling like a bear about to growl.

“Brave of you,” Igan commented once the door closed.

“Should I be worried, my lord?” I asked.

“Not at all,” he pulled the lantern from the wall and carried it before us down the hallway.

The stone floor angled shallowly downward and soon I couldn’t see the door we’d entered by. There were no other torches or lanterns on the walls. Our footsteps echoed dully, and the air grew cooler. He said nothing, and I began to wonder if I had made a serious mistake.

He stopped walking suddenly, and I almost ran into him. Another door reflected in the torchlight, and Igan pulled a heavy key from around his neck and inserted it. A dull clang rather than a snick followed, and he pulled back several bolts as well. He stepped aside for me to enter first.

There was blue daylight from somewhere above, but when I looked up, I couldn’t see any kind of outlet. Lord Igan set the lantern down, and the candle light instantly magnified, reflecting across metal plates, and brightening the room.

“What do you see?” he asked.

We stood on a landing, with three steps down to the rest of the round room. A circle, old as the one Lord Vasilik used, including the star and runes around the edges, was inlaid into the stone floor. Each of the lines were made of gold, except the star which reflected softly, like the dead man’s armor. The very center was dark, as though a pit were open and allowing darkness to seep up from somewhere unspeakable. It felt wrong, worse than Lord Vasilik, or his charm, or death. I had the impression that if I stepped into the circle, I would fall and never stop.

Igan leaned forward to get a look at my face. “So, I was right. You can see it. You’re the young sorcerer I’ve heard about.”

I had to tear my eyes away from the dark hole to look at him. “Why show me this?” I asked. “And what have you heard about me?”

“To answer you, I must ask another question. Do you know the legend of the Ancients’ curse?”

I shook my head, eyes drawn back to the circle, the dark nothing in the middle curling over itself.

“It’s not as common. But when Vasilik the Conqueror first came to these lands, there was already a great people living here. The Ancients. They built this city, and many other fortresses on and in the mountains, and had magics and sciences we cannot even dream of. They were still no match for Vasilik and his armies, which from all accounts were as numberless as ants. Once the Ancients knew they would be destroyed, they used their sorceries to curse the land against Vasilik and his people. That is the real reason Vasilik fell, and why the north has never been at peace since,” he paused, looking out at the circle too. “With help from the Bright gods, I learned how to contain it here, at its point of origin for as long as I live. Strangely enough, the year I trapped the curse, was the same year your Vasilik Reborn began building his empire.

“I can’t destroy the curse. I think it would take an Ancient to do that, and they don’t exist anymore. But there are options. I have every intention of making sure he loses, even in victory. You see, I’ve dreamed this many times. I’ve seen you here, standing as we stand now.”

“What?” I asked in surprise.

“You are not the only one who receives direction from the gods through dreams, or premonitions,” he said, then picked back up where I’d interrupted. “I saw you here, and I saw that you have a choice to make.” He held out a hand to the circles. “Because, what you choose will determine what happens when I pass the containment of the curse on to your Vasilik.”

“He is a sorcerer,” I said, not really in defense, but stating fact.

He laughed. “Have you ever heard the second half of the prophecy concerning Vasilik’s return? The first part says his empire will be the last. That’s where most stop, believing it means everything will be returned to what it once was. They forget, or ignore, the rest that says his empire will destroy the Andish people.”

Because he’s already dead? I thought, feeling chilled as I continued to watch the cancerous blackness in the circle.

“May I see your hand?” he asked, taking it before I could object. His thumb spread my fingers, exposing my palm. He studied it, moving his index finger down and over the pulse in my wrist, then up to my fingertips. His touch tingled more than just the contact of skin on skin, an afterimage of sorcery trailed behind his movements. When he finally dropped my hand, he seemed older. “Your own death is unsure, but it feels nearby.”

I jerked a step back from him. Not even other fortune tellers had been able to tell me how long I’d live, as if something were wrong with the lines. Perhaps he was lying. Something told me he wasn’t.

“How long have I got?” he asked, mouth twisting.

“Not long,” I answered, still worrying at what he’d said. He would die by his own hand.

He nodded, and patted my shoulder as if we shared a secret, and with that, he picked up the lantern to leave. I didn’t follow.

“Was it Fetka, your spy, that told you I could read fortunes?”

“Fetka told me many things, and he wasn’t the only one.” He motioned me to the door.

“Did you know he was possessed by a leech? Or did you tell him to summon one?”

“I told you, warlords are vindictive bastards,” he said, unoffended. “Fetka was tired of waiting. I didn’t discourage him.”

I wasn't entirely satisfied, but I also wanted to leave the room. Making sure all the locks were secured on the door, Igan slipped the heavy key under his collar. My eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, and I noticed how the dull lantern light emphasized the lines around his mouth and neck.

We reached the other end of the hallway, and he stopped before opening it, made sure he looked me square in the eye. "I have one more question for you. What are you willing to choose?"

I blanked my face. Why would he ask me that? And why "choose" instead of "do?"

He opened the door, letting in the light of the throne room. Asa studied me hard as I came around the throne after Igan, and I quietly nodded I was fine. I returned to my place before the dais, and Igan returned to stand before the throne.

"I will accept Lord Vasilik's offer," he said clearly for everyone to hear. "In two days, before the new moon, I will fight for the right to rule Molishanke. A duel between sorcerers and warlords." A ripple of anxiety ran through the hall.

I bowed, meeting Igan's eyes one last time. He half smiled, seeming to ask his last question one more time. What are you willing to choose?

Chapter 14

Asa and I were escorted back to the city gates, where we mounted our horses. The gates had barely shut behind us when Asa could no longer hold his peace.

“What did he say to you?”

For our entire walk down the street I’d been contemplating what to tell Asa, and what to tell Lord Vasilik. “He showed me a circle and told me he is a powerful sorcerer.”

“Stronger than we thought?”

Yes. He’s holding an entire curse at bay. But then, Lord Vasilik had trapped the souls of an entire army in a medallion, and he was a feeder.

“I’m not sure,” I said.

He’d said my death was nearby. Why would he tell me that? Why would he ask me what I would choose to do? I didn’t have choices. What I needed to do was finish my bargain with Lord Vasilik and leave. I was so close...

Thankfully, after his initial questions, Asa left me alone as we rode back.

We rode directly to Lord Vasilik’s tent. His generals were already gathered, as well as several of their officers and captains. For this, they met under a wide, open pavilion set before the tent’s main entrance and council room. I formally repeated Igan’s acceptance to Lord Vasilik, who then rose and addressed his followers.

“My lords, before the new moon arrives, Molishanke will be ours!”

Cheering rose from the gathered men.

“Tonight, we will light the bonfires and dance.”

As the cheering continued, Lord Vasilik nodded to me. Tonight. I bowed and disappeared into the main tent, to be sure I was prepared. Asa followed me.

I hadn't realized, until the days grew warm enough to make the tent stifling, that the outer walls were made of two layers. There was a thick, outer layer that insulated and was proof against harsh weather, and a thin inner layer, which allowed air to circulate and still maintain some privacy. At the moment, the outer layer was rolled up and stretched out as a pavilion roof to create shade all around the tent walls, and a breeze found its way through intentional gaps.

Within my room, I pulled out my pack and began sorting through my belongings. I had a better one, oiled against water and bigger, with compartmented pockets, that I'd saved just for this. The rune bones, of course, went into the inner pocket, safe from weather and thieves. The coins I'd earned in Avishki, and their box, went in next to them. Clothes, including my coat, gloves, heavy stockings, and spare pants. Admittedly, they took up room, but better to be prepared, and perhaps I could sell them once I didn't need them anymore. A bowl, cup, and spoon, as well as flint, tinder, some rope and lengths of leather, and several candles ended up in outer pockets.

I left the charms I'd attempted to carve. I could always find more wood. I'd make due with the coat for bedding.

The Harvester figurine watched me from the floor. What are you willing to choose?

"I'm leaving," I said to it. "As soon as the bargain's done, I'm going south."

"Are you?"

I jumped, turning to see Hepsiba in the doorway.

"Sorry I didn't knock," she said. "I was going to ask if you needed help getting anything for tonight. Vasilik has asked Asa and I to guide you to the lake."

"I was just coming to do that," I said, standing and leaving the figurine on the floor beside the stuffed pack. I followed her out into the brazier room.

Asa sat, eating a bowl of some kind of meaty stew. He watched me as I pulled a messenger bag off a hook and set it on the ground to begin filling with the few things I'd need. Hepsiba brought me the map, showing me how to keep it from ripping as I folded it up. Then we went for candles. At most, I guessed I'd need ten, but we only had half-used ones still in this part of the tent. Hepsiba left to find some unused ones.

Asa set his bowl aside. "Igan showed you more than a circle, didn't he?"

I didn't want to discuss Igan. What he'd said was...private in some way, and not just reading my death.

He didn't press it, nodding more to himself than to me. "As long as you know what you're doing."

It caught me unawares, and I couldn't help the expulsion of short laughter. Did I know what I was doing? Did I know what I was willing to do?

"Not a good time to start going crazy, Curi," Asa said, perplexed by my reaction.

I pulled in several deep breaths, fighting for control. It took longer than it should.

"I told Igan he would die soon," I said.

"Was that wise?"

I shrugged. "I'm leaving tonight, right after my bargain's done."

"Ah," he leaned back. "So, there is some sort of sorcery going on tonight. Something to make sure he wins, right?"

"Essentially," I said.

"You don't want to stay? Once the wars are over, it could be a good life."

I shook my head, thinking of Igan's curse, and again feeling laughter wanting to escape. "I don't know that it would be. Besides," I ran a hand over the folded map, "I want to leave. I've wanted to leave this frozen, death ridden place for years."

"People always die," he pointed out.

"Not by getting hacked to bits," I said, vehemently. "Or with axes pushing their brains out."

"True," he said, sighing. "But don't think anywhere is going to be a perfect paradise."

"Are we talking about leaving again?" Hepsiba came in backwards, pushing the flap aside with her hip and shoulder, arms full of ten candles.

Asa was up and taking them out of her arms before she could protest. He brought them over to me, and she watched, one hand on her hip, equal parts frustration and affection. I packed the candles alongside the map.

"I think we should go too," she said.

Asa swiveled his body around to her, as did I. She looked down at us, hand still on her hip. She spoke to Asa. "We promised we'd stay until he was the only warlord left. He'll be that in two days."

"Curi says he's leaving tonight," Asa said.

She looked at me, "We'll catch up. He's not that hard to track." She approached Asa, putting her hands on his shoulders. "I know you want to leave too. It's time for something new, and..." she flashed a quick smile, "if Curi wants to see peacocks and the ocean, and then decide it's too hot there, why not?"

I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath until Asa nodded, pulling her gently down into an embrace. He shot me a look that said, "get used to it." I decided to find the rest of what I needed myself.

But that only occupied a small amount of my time, and I was left with nothing to do until the sun set. I finally retreated to my room and pulled out the bones.

The Harvester figurine I shoved into the pack, burying it in the coat. Igan's last question kept nagging at me, repeating like a chant I couldn't stop.

What was I willing to choose?

I shook the bones into my hand, rolling them around and not even sure if I wanted to use them. What would I ask?

The bones clicked against each other. Before the next dawn, I'd be free. And maybe, I wouldn't be alone. I'd never contemplated the idea, but I cupped it like an orange, barely daring to breathe in its bright scent...

If I lived that long.

Igan's reading of my palm dashed across my thoughts with souring soberness. He could've been lying. It'd be in his interest to make me doubt, potentially pass that doubt onto Lord Vasilik. But if he hadn't been lying, then that was even more reason to end my bargain with the feeder and leave.

Suddenly, my revulsion for the dead man resurfaced, the curling gnawing in my gut that left me near paralyzed when I looked too long at his eyes, or when I watched his shadow defy the laws of nature. Dark gods, he should be dead. Beyond the Dark trees dead.

But...

Broken bargains had terrible consequences...

Almost absently I let the bones drop onto the ground rug. They clacked and scattered, but I didn't look down.

The Harvester had asked me almost the same question as Igan. What was I willing to do?

I looked down.

Ending. Beginning. Both were possible, separately and at once.

Angrily, I swatted the bones, sending them scattering across the tent flooring to bounce against the wall.

The Choice rune managed to land propped against the wall, the others forming a bent path leading up to it. I hastily got up and scraped them into the bag, gut twisting.

Chapter 15

“Leave the horses,” Lord Vasilik snapped.

Already dismounted and in the process of attaching my horse’s long lead line to a tree, I ignored him. We already knew we could only take the horses so far, but all of us were nervous. I double checked that my pack was still securely strapped to the saddle, then slung the other bag across my shoulders. A few more hours, that was all.

Over to my right, the brush rustled and a fox trotted past. She brushed against my leg as she followed the rapidly narrowing trail. I was suddenly aware that I was the slowest member in the group. I hiked as fast as I could, and still lost sight of the dead man within five minutes. As the trail grew steep, I used my hands, grabbing onto young trees and shrubs to help pull my body along. Asa, as tall as my waist in wolf skin, passed me on my left, then stopped to watch me struggle.

“I’m getting there,” I huffed aloud. “Any sign of Igan?”

The wolf shook itself, as if I was funny.

It was a valid fear. None of us knew what he could do with his sorcery, and we were technically invading his territory. I couldn’t help but think of the black curse roiling around. Could Igan let it leak out of its circle? I thought of telling Asa that even he had flaws, but saved my breath and kept climbing, the bag digging into my collarbones and shoulders. Perhaps I shouldn’t have packed so many candles.

Just ahead, the ground flattened as I came to the ridge, and I paused to look down to the starlit mountain lake nestled between the hills. Hepsiba was right, it was stunning. The sky reflected perfectly, so that the pale reds and blues of the stars appeared magnified. A dark blotch

rose from the middle of the still surface, an island with the tips of trees brushed silver in the last bit of moonlight.

“Hurry,” Lord Vasilik called from below me, reminding me we were on a deadline for the exact moment when he’d been killed. I looked down at the steep descent. Up had been easier going in the early morning darkness. If I slipped now, who knew what I’d hit on the way down. I obeyed as best I could, straining my eyes to see the ground in front of me, which was like trying to see through Darker realm itself. I misread a stone as a dip in the ground and stumbled, frantically throwing my body backwards to at least slide feet first and managed to angle my torso sideways. I grabbed for leaning branches to slow me, but couldn’t get a good hold as I slid over the rocky path. A great weight of fur thumped down onto my body, pushing me into the ground and holding me in place.

I brought my arms out to hold myself still, and Asa redistributed his weight to let me sit up and brace my legs against a rock below me. He then slid to sit on my feet and make sure I didn’t start sliding again.

“I’m all right,” I breathed.

He growled.

“All right, my hands are bleeding, and my backside is going to be nicely bruised, but nothing’s broken. Satisfied?”

He leaned over and sniffed at my left knee, which didn’t feel wonderful, but was likely just scraped like my hands.

“I’ll wash it off in the lake,” I said, levering myself up and keeping close to the trees and brush as I started again. Asa stayed close, waiting for me to fall again. I didn’t.

Lord Vasilik was impatiently waiting at the edge of the water, and as soon as I found level ground, Asa took off to the left and out of sight. No doubt, he'd be telling Hepsiba how clumsy I was while they continued to keep their eyes and ears open for any sign of Igan.

As I drew closer, I saw the medallion in his hand, tilted up towards the sky. He spoke to it, whispering a chant like the one he'd trapped them with. It made my bones ache, and natural fear climb my spine as opaque shapes formed and slithered out of the silver surface. Anset-de and his men wavered in the air before their master, and frost formed on the edges of the water line.

"Circle the island," Lord Vasilik instructed. "Let none of my enemies come near."

Silently, Anset-de bowed, and the whole of them disappeared, the only sign of their passage the icy shifting of air.

"We're headed to the island," Lord Vasilik said to me, setting foot in the shallows.

"We're swimming?" I asked. He hadn't told me exactly where he'd died, and I'd assumed it would be on the shoreline. I couldn't swim.

He continued walking, water creeping higher up his boots until it reached midcalf. Then he reached down and touched a half-submerged tree trunk. I felt sorcery wrap around the wood and twist it. The wood groaned as it did as it was told, lifting out of the water, and forming into a boat. He turned to me, eyes shining as they always did in the dark. Involuntarily, I took a step back, suddenly just as afraid of him as I had been in Avishki.

This was wrong, *he* was wrong.

"Curi," he commanded.

Without looking at him, I waded out and got into the boat, then almost screamed at the feel of it. Where my feet touched, I felt the sorcery writhing like worms through dirt. I couldn't sit down, and instead balanced with the least amount of feet and hands touching the wood. I didn't

look back to see how he steered the thing forward. The ride felt like an eternity of disturbing the calm, reflected stars.

The moment the bottom scraped against the island's shore, I leaped out, running five good steps away. He was more measured as he disembarked, and the moment he no longer touched it, it became just a log. I followed him as he strode purposefully across the shore.

We headed towards the island's center, passing ancient pine trees and boulders, as if the ground had heaved up from the lake and never settled again. A minute later, I heard the quiet rush of a stream falling over rocks. A streambed appeared beside us, and within a few more feet, Lord Vasilik stopped.

"It was beneath this tree, although it was smaller then," he said. I stepped around him to see the tall pine, the grooves of its bark deeply textured. As with many ancient things, I felt the tree watching. I could picture Lord Vasilik's death, the blood running over the roots, and I wondered if the tree would recognize him. Then, I wondered how a feeder had known a man bled out here on the island and managed to get here. But it had, and the tree did remember. The ground itself seemed to whisper of what it'd seen, of the unclean blood that'd soaked into it. My hands trembled, and I clenched them tightly.

"Right here," the dead man left my side and walked to the eroded stones. "And he stood over there to watch." He pointed to a flatter area between two large roots.

Managing a nod, I unslung the bag, setting it far enough away that it would be outside the influence of my circle. I pulled out the candles, flint, and Lord Vasilik's inlaid box of treasures. A small breeze fluttered through the branches and I shivered, my sweat cooling.

What was I going to choose?

If I were to turn back, to break the bargain, it had to be now, before I began.

“Curi,” he called my name as if aware of the doubts crowding my head and making my breathing hurt. No premonition came to reassure me, just the breeze against my neck.

I took five of the candles and a length of rope and handed them to him.

Five of the candles for me. Even if I didn’t need a circle, I felt the star of the body had to be strong. So, I was very careful as I set them up, using my knife to cut the cardinal lines in the dirt, then laying my own length of rope in a circle connecting them. Then, I placed the candles, while Lord Vasilik mirrored me, creating his own circle in the spot where he’d died.

Lastly, I pulled out the box and placed it at the head of my circle, shaking a winter chill from my fingers. Above me, the breeze grew stronger, and the great pine creaked, unfriendly, voicing its disapproval. Grimacing, I sat down in my circle, the box before me. Carefully, I unlatched it, the chill of its surface again making my fingers ache. The needle, the eggshell, and the rabbit skull. They looked so fragile, nesting on the swatch of fur.

“Don’t wear the medallion,” I said, looking over before he could sit down, and wished I hadn’t.

There was nothing human about him, his movements were too deliberate as he removed the medallion and dropped it into the pack, it was like he was nursing an injury. I wondered how this place was affecting him.

“These three,” I asked, once he sat in his circle, facing me. “The skull, the eggshell, and the needle. Why do you keep them?”

“They are what is left of my first life,” he said, heavy and cold. “The needle I used to mend my uniforms. The eggshell was a gift. The rabbit was my first failed attempt at sorcery.”

I nodded. A tool for fixing, a thing to love, and a cautionary reminder. So...normal. They carried the last hints of who he’d been and would never be again.

What would he be?

“Last thing,” I said. “What is your name?” I hadn’t wanted to ask, but knew it would be necessary.

“Ulbert Kersik Montemaine.”

I nodded, committing the odd sounds to memory, and lit the candles at the same time he did, then closed my eyes and looked for the mists. It was almost too easy, like lifting a flimsy, ripped fabric door.

My breath frosted as I opened my eyes to the never-ending field and setting sky. The Dark trees loomed behind me, but they moaned like the one my circle sat under. The dead man was not there. I stood up, turning on the spot, half expecting the Harvester to be there. Everything was so still, so dead, the same in every direction. At my feet, the circle was barely visible, the candles nowhere to be seen.

I breathed deeply, steadying my nerve. Something was different, a sense of hostility that hadn’t been there before. It bumped up against my circle, unable to get to me.

What was I going to do?

An anchor, I needed something to draw me back to this spot. I pulled out my knife and cut into my arm, opening the same place as when I’d made the bargain, letting a few drops fall at the head of the star. The moment the blood hit the cold earth, I felt it like an extension of my own body. My heart throbbed, and with it the lines of the circle pulsed. I cut a piece of my shirt and knotted it around the cut, then I picked up the box and stepped out of the circle. The pulse remained steady. I looked down at the box and the leftover pieces of life.

“Where are you?” I whispered.

The box warmed from cold to almost hot, the inlaid soft metal glowing faintly like my circle. I walked where it wanted to go.

The hostility increased, although I saw and heard nothing. The mists continued to permeate the air, the Dark trees to watch my slow progress. Each step became harder, my feet growing cold. A need to walk towards the trees warred with my desire to find the dead man. The mist grew thicker, my body colder.

Witch boy, the mist whispered.

I whipped my head around. She shouldn't be here. It wasn't possible. There was nothing there but mist. I realized I couldn't see the trees or the sky anymore.

Curi? another voice. I sucked in a breath, gritted my teeth to make sure I didn't answer. I felt a stabbing pain in my foot, looked down and saw the blades of grass had become exactly that, thorny blades growing up between the thin leaves.

Witch boy, the voice hissed from all directions. *What are you doing?*

Stinging pain shot up my leg, tore against my boots. I dug my fingers into the box, the warmth turning to a burning heat. I had to be close. Another step, the grasses tangled my ankles, holding me down. Growling, I jerked my legs and ran, grinding my teeth against crying out. The whispers echoed in my ears.

What are you doing? Witch boy, what are you doing?!

I stumbled, pulled the box to my body as I caught myself on one knee. In front of me, I saw the line of a circle and no grass. I'd found him. I tried to stand up, strained against the dead thorns winding their way around my feet and legs. Frantically, I pulled out my knife and began slashing at the dry, yellow growth, almost cutting my foot. One foot came loose, and I jerked at the other, nearly hopping to keep the grasses from trying again. The circle was only a step away.

“Let go!” I ground out, straining as hard as I could and leaning out over the circle. The grass snapped. I fell onto my back, my heel dragging across the line of the circle.

I held the box to my chest, hoping the eggshell and skull were still intact. I didn’t have time to check. Where my heel smudged out the line, the grasses and thrones began to grow, tendrils of mist seeping after them.

Scrambling upright, I turned and took a few tentative steps forward. There was another circle in the middle of the wider ring, this one crude, the runes drawn hastily, and I recognized it as his doorway. He was waiting for me.

Just as when I first saw his death, his tattered, bloody uniform overlay the dark green I’d seen him in on the island. Grey death superimposed over his unnaturally healthy appearance. A separate body and soul inhabiting the same space. He watched me, unblinking, face terrible. Everything about him wrong.

I stood paralyzed, unable to breathe.

What was I doing?

Slowly, his lips split apart, teeth white as the mists. A thorn bit into my foot.

“Ulbert Kersik Montemaine,” I said, gasping in breath, holding out the box and opening the lid. “Choose, and I’ll carry you back to life.”

He moved like a walking statue, slow and painful. With a finger, he reached out and touched one of the trinkets. I didn’t see which one. He disintegrated into the box. I snapped the lid closed and sprinted, jumping over the outer circle and not looking back.

The mists twisted and writhed like living serpents, and a wind began to blow, wild and angry. I had no right! The dead belonged here. It was wrong, wrong, wrong!

I had no idea where I was, couldn't see anything. The box felt heavier than before, and I gripped it so tight my knuckles turned white. Clutching it to my chest, I let go with one hand and dug fingers into the cut on my arm. Pain burned, throbbing with my pulse, and an answering throb came from somewhere to my right. The sharp grass cut at my feet. I kept running.

The world howled and screamed around me and I had to stop again, dig my fingers into my arm, and follow the pain. And then it stopped.

Still, dead.

Ten steps away, my circle still pulsed. The Harvester stood in front of it.

He stared at me, red eyes glowing like coals, arms crossed over his chest. I couldn't move forward.

"This is what you choose?" he asked, voice reverberating. "To steal the feeder from death?"

"I made a bargain," I said. "I had to."

"Bargains can be broken," he hissed. "The choice is always there."

"I had to!" I shouted, voice raw. For a moment, it was my voice that echoed.

The Harvester stepped aside, held out a hand. "Then go, I will not stop you."

Hesitantly, I walked forward, waiting for him to change his mind. Expressionless, motionless, he watched. To step back into the circle exactly where I'd stepped out, I had to come within inches of him. Without meaning to, I looked at his throat, where blood should pulse and show faintly through the skin. There was none, nor did he breathe. I ducked my head.

"Curi," he said, the moment I was safely in the circle, box still in hand. "I come for everyone, sooner or later. Regrettable, that lesson hasn't already been learned."

For some reason, I was sure he didn't only mean the dead man I carried out with me.

Gasping, I sat upright in my circle under the tree. Across from me, Lord Vasilik stood in his circle, unmoving, staring at me. Heart racing, I looked down. The box was locked, and seemed to hold a light of its own. I had no desire to touch it again.

I slumped back as the candles went out, sorcery draining out of me and the circle. I stared at the most benign thing I could, a rock, half buried where the roots of the tree burrowed into the earth. Lord Vasilik stepped out of his circle, kicking the rope out of shape, and came down to mine. With his toe, he found the overlapping edges of the rope and nudged them aside.

Somewhere in my mind, in the pulse of my blood, I felt something shift and break like the circle. He met my eyes.

It was done.

The bargain was complete. I was free.

Hesitantly, he knelt before the box, examining it and unwilling to touch it. I supposed it was odd, staring at your own soul.

“There’s another box in the pack,” I said in a wispy croak.

He reached for it, dragging the pack over and pulling out the plain pine box I’d found. Carefully, as though it were made of blown glass, he picked up his treasured box, and gingerly placed it inside the pine box. He closed the lid, fit the catch. Only then did he turn his attention to me.

“Come,” he said, standing with the box under one arm. He held out a hand to me, smiling in satisfaction.

Stiffly, I reached up, unsteadily rising to my feet. It hurt, and I looked down, realizing my feet were cut, as was my arm. I looked up at him, intending to tell him I was going to be very, very slow, and saw...

The ground met my knees with unforgiving force. My head spun, clouded as though the Dark mists had followed me, my gift for reading fortunes flaring to life. I felt I'd been driven through by a spear.

"No," I gasped.

"What is it?" the dead man asked sharply.

It wasn't me who opened my mouth. "Feeder, do you think to cheat death more than you already have?" I choked, pressing my hands against my lips, and trying to make myself stop. I wouldn't speak it, not now. Some other force made my hands drop, drew my voice out. I looked up at him, terrified. "You will lose what you hoped to gain. The necromancer has secured your immortality only until you are betrayed by her who lets you live."

I slumped, wanting to rip out my own tongue. His dead, immortal face became a snarling mask. My shirt tore as he hulled me to my feet. I barely saw his fist as it swung into my face.

Everything turned black.

Chapter 16

I wasn't under the island tree.

All around me it was a dark, velvety texture, like the underside of leaves in the night. Despite that, I could see silver paths around me, like the veins crisscrossing inside the leaf. I looked up, and saw the Dark trees, each of the paths finding a space between the trunks and beyond. There were no mists.

My feet stood on darkness, and not a path. It seemed wrong. I stepped to the side to follow on a faint track that curled along beside me. As my foot came down, I stepped on nothing but velvet black, and the path remained a step away.

I tried again with a different path; my feet touched black. I tried again, wandering at random and watching paths move away. The Dark trees refused to let me pass. My feet still hurt, and my arm still throbbed. My head and mouth felt clouded and dry. Tired beyond anything I'd felt before, I sat down at the base of a tree, and stared at the black world. Frost crept up my feet.

"Back so soon," the Harvester said sharply.

Dully, I blinked at him. He was almost luminous in the darkness.

"I thought you said you wouldn't stop me," I returned.

"I can't make you choose," he said. "I can teach lessons. Igan warned you, *I* warned you, and still you chose."

I looked at the paths meandering through the trees, then down to the frost covering my legs. I couldn't feel it.

"Did he kill me?" I asked.

"Yes, but he's not going to let you go so easily," he shook his head. "I'm sure he believes you betrayed him."

“That was you.”

“I teach lessons,” he repeated. “What do you think he will do once he learns Igan has left the Ancients’ curse on him, and that you knew.”

Something tugged at my chest, a pain that dug under my breastbone. I curled, frightened in a way I couldn’t explain.

“Is he?” I began, couldn’t finish, feeling that my heart was being ripped out.

The Harvester smiled dispassionately.

Part Two

Chapter 1

Her yellow dress pooled around her feet, gold and silver beads embroidered into celestial patterns over the fabric. She glared at the fire radiating in the hearth, leaned down to the pile of neatly stacked wood, and picked up two fat pieces.

Everything in the room flickered gold, bronze, and bright orange, from the gold threaded drapes covering the walls, to the lanterns hopelessly competing with the great fire. Standing before the twisting flames, beads catching and reflecting the multidirectional light, she could have been her own blazing torch.

I rubbed a finger over my forehead and eyes, blinking at the brightness, and adjusted my shoulders to see her better from my cramped place behind the wall. This was a scene I'd witnessed before; a young bride stolen just before her wedding day. She was lovely, her body not quite done settling into her woman's curves, just as all the others before her.

She bounced the wood in her hands, as if dissatisfied with their weight, then forcefully chucked both pieces into the hearth. Sparks flew up, dangerously close to her skirts, but she turned away from the flames to face the room.

Eyes closed, she tilted her head back to the ceiling, gold light burnishing her dark hair as if it too were made of metallic threads. She let out a breath through gritted teeth, then dropped her head and opened her eyes to look directly at the place where I watched. Automatically I pulled away from the crack, tensed and waiting for her to exclaim in outrage. Instead, she continued to turn towards the single window and the patch of night sky; the one place the glowing lights did not touch. For a moment, she stared at the black rectangular expanse, face turned just enough that

I couldn't see anything of her thoughts. A cushioned chair rested before the window, enticing anyone to sit and enjoy the luxuries of bread and drink set on an adjacent table.

She ignored it, turning to the opposite wall and the tall, beast of a wardrobe that covered most of it. The doors were carved to resemble a great willow tree, but she didn't even stop to run a finger over the craftsmanship before pulling them open as far as they would go.

Fabrics of various weaves and designs stuffed the interior full of a miasma of color. I recognized a few of them. She had to take a step back as several skirts expanded with the sudden removal of the confining doors and inrush of air. I heard her mutter something under her breath, and although her back was to me, her frustration become very evident as she reached in and began removing every coat, dress, and other articles of clothing I couldn't even name. She tossed them all into a puffed heap on the down-feather bed.

That done, she stepped into the empty wooden box. It was deep enough that her body was shadowed from the lamps, but I could hear her skirts brushing against the wood, and a soft tapping began, like she was knocking on the interior paneling.

I adjusted my position again, pressing my hands to either side of the crack in the wall and tilting my head, as if somehow, I could get a better angle to see what she was doing.

She emerged, smiling, stepped down from the wardrobe and retrieved the eating utensils from the table across the room. Halfway back to the wardrobe, she paused, and picked up the fire poker as well. With complete disregard to her fine dress, she knelt before the wardrobe, setting the makeshift tools beside her. She slid her fingers along the wardrobe's bottom panel, tracing the joints that connected it with the decorative front skirt and sides. Satisfied, she picked up the fork and dull spreading knife, carefully inserted them between the wood panels and began wiggling them back and forth to create a crack. She had to maneuver herself across the floor to reach the

full expanse of the wardrobe, prying at one end and then the other. Every now and then she muttered to herself, and several strands of hair worked their way loose from her braids to fall against her cheeks. Impatiently, she pushed them back behind her ears, wiping away sweat in the same motion. Back and forth she continued, the beads on her dress scratching against the stone floor, pushing the fork and knife deeper into the slowly widening gap. Her hand slipped off the handle of the fork and banged against the door, eliciting a stifled cry.

I winced. She'd have a bruise on the back of her hand.

For a moment, I pulled away from the wall and looked down at my dusty feet. I should have left. I'd seen all I needed before she even opened the wardrobe. Still, I put my eye back to the crack. None of the others had been quite this...active. Certainly not willing to apply a poker to the wardrobe, which was exactly what she was doing.

The gap made by the knife and fork was now large enough for her to insert the tip of the poker between the bottom panel and the front skirt. She got to her feet, angled the poker, and levered it down. Wood cried in protest, a drawn-out wail accompanied by her own determined growl, and a sudden pop as the wardrobe's floor panel gave way.

There was a hollow space nestled between the wardrobe's bottom and the stone floor. The poker clattered out of her hands, and she glanced towards the room's outer door, head tilted as though listening for any sign she'd been overheard. She needn't have worried. The walls of this place were very thick, and the person she was worried about was likely preoccupied. There was no reason for him to believe she'd spend her first night here differently than any of the brides before her.

Back on her knees, she reached into her dress, into hidden pockets that looked like part of the beadwork. I couldn't see what she pulled out; her fists were clenched tightly, and her body

angled just enough to hide whatever she'd been carrying. She thrust both hands into the open space and whispered what sounded like a prayer before withdrawing them, now open and empty. For a moment, she held still as a doll, attention fixed on what she'd hidden, until the fire seemed the only living thing there.

I waited with her, feeling that if I moved now, she would somehow know.

At last, she shook herself, shuddering in a breath from the gut, then began the process of replacing the panel.

I pulled away, letting the dusty grey drape fall to cover the crack. Around me, the chill of the stones suddenly felt more acute, as if the warmth of her room had managed to seep into my body. I shivered. The space between the walls was too small for me to sit down, but I leaned my head back against the stones, waiting for the darkness to remove the bright afterimages of what I'd just observed.

Eventually, back pressed against one wall, I slid along the narrow tunnel, the stale air allowing me to order my thoughts and face into their habitual state. A light slowly took shape ahead of me, indicating a heavy drape at the end of the tunnel. I paused to take one deep preparatory breath, as if I were about to dive into a lake, then pushed the drape aside.

I entered a room similar to hers, adorned with a lit fireplace and chairs placed before a table set with a bowl of the season's fruit. As it was early spring there wasn't much to be had except the blackberries that grew on the south side, and by some miracle produced all year. There was no bread as had been on her table, and the rest of the room was spare to the point of harsh.

My master turned from his stiff-backed observation of the stars and gave me all his attention. "Well?"

I took a moment to brush the cobwebbed dust from my tunic and pants. There was more than I'd thought, and it left smears on my sleeves, probably my face too. My mouth tasted of dirt. Even without looking, I knew he watched me, every tendon in his body tensing with impatience, a bull barely holding himself in check. Still, I did not answer him; took more time to walk to the table, draw back the least comfortable chair, and sit down. Only then did I look at him.

"She is lovely," I said, as neutrally as I could. "Seems less flighty than the others you've brought." I did not use the words 'taken' or 'stolen.' I knew better.

"Is she the one?" he loomed over me, ignoring the other chair to instead grip the back of mine in one hand, and rest the other on the table beside me. He was tall, and always seemed to take up more space than he really did, as though what he was couldn't all be contained within his body. I fought the urge to cringe away, to put more space between us. This close, underneath the faintly normal smells of soap and leather, I caught a sense of his other smell; something like frostbite, cold and unforgiving.

I dropped my eyes to the table. His shadow dissected the light wood, like the moon half covered. The light was much lower in this room, the fire fighting to warm the cold stones. In the bowl, the skin of the berries reflected the fire's movement in the same way as the beads on her dress had; miniature celestial orbs. I felt the chair creak under his clenched fingers.

In the past, he'd sat across from me, sharing the bowl between us, as if subverting our roles of master and servant would make me more inclined to tell him what he wanted to hear. I couldn't guess what answer he wanted tonight, or if he'd noticed anything unusual about her.

Without asking permission, I reached around his hand to take a few blackberries and pop them into my mouth. He didn't stop me, although I watched his knuckles tighten, and his shadow seemed to shift impatiently. They were velvet warm, the juice tart and eager to burst past their thin

skins. I mushed them around with my tongue, avoiding getting seeds in my teeth, and letting the juice coat my dusty throat. A small moment of pleasure before I swallowed.

“Just like the others,” I said, “I can’t tell.”

He lifted his fist and slammed it down again onto the table top, making the bowl jump and the table vibrate. I sat rigid, trying not to clench my hands too tightly.

“Dark gods, you are useless!” he gritted out in a snarl, teeth exposed to the orange firelight.

The hand on the back of my chair gripped the back of my neck, turning my head ever so slightly toward his. He leaned in close again, and I could see the individual white hairs threading through his beard, the faint red veins coloring the whites of his eyes. I did not look away now, no matter that the crawling up my spine said I would pay for my subtle prodding at his patience. My best defense was to let him see I was not lying. The hand resting on the table twitched, as though wanting to find something else to hit. My body was close. I didn’t dare blink.

“You watched her for some time,” he accused.

“I thought to try and see her fortune,” I said carefully, saw the bare hint of hope begin to untighten his anger. “But I saw nothing,” I finished, bracing.

The sound that slipped passed his teeth was one of utter disgust, and his fist lifted off the table, the one at my neck squeezed. Still meeting his eyes, I read exactly what he wanted to do. Then, he abruptly jerked away, whole body hunching as if I’d struck him. He stopped at the window, pressed his hands to the sill and leaned forward with all his weight, perhaps pleading with the stars and wind to answer him better than I.

“Well,” I said, grabbing another good handful of berries, unintentionally crushing them. The ghost of his fingers tingled on my neck. “Maybe if you hadn’t cursed me, things would be different. I’ve seen nothing since that night; not even a death.”

His head snapped back around, the shadows around him seeming to grow in the flickering light.

“Get out,” he hissed, teeth exposed like an animal about to spring.

Already standing, I bowed as I always did, feet together and arms at my sides.

Once in the dim corridor, I knocked back the rest of the berries from my hand into my mouth, trying to enjoy their sweet tang. It was hard not to run down the stairs to the ground floor.

Only when I was outside the dilapidated castle did I look back, tilting my head up to the only two spots of light emitting from his and her respective windows. Two lonely yellow eyes in the decaying bones of the old stones.

“How long will you last, lady?” I asked the night, breath carrying a touch of frost into the air. The spring wind ruffled through the trees growing up and around the city’s ruins. They seemed to laugh, as if at a joke. I couldn’t help but agree. Every year the trees grew taller, the brush denser, and the stones crumbled into pebbles. Exactly the same, every single year... and there had been so many years. It was harder to believe she could be different from the others.

Shaking my head, I began the long walk back to my tower.

Chapter 2

Melet

Beneath her, the horse pranced, eagerly pulling on the bit. Before her, the dark trees opened to reveal a long mountain meadow. A summer breeze gently brushed across the grass, butter yellow and sky blue wildflowers scattered throughout like fallen festival flowers. She let the horse have his head and he burst into a full gallop across the sweet grass, disrupting the last vestiges of evaporating dew clinging to leaves. She couldn't help but laugh, a real, uncontrolled laugh, letting it roll up from her chest and ring out to echo around her.

Finally, after four months of smiling when her captor returned each night, of learning that he preferred to converse with her while he stabled his horse, finally, he trusted her enough to let her roam the woods while he was away. But, as easy as it would be, she had no intention of trying to run away. She knew he would come after her.

She drew on the reins, slowing the gelding to a prancing trot along the meadow's far edge, and finally to a giddy stop. She looked back, reached down, and patted the gelding's golden shoulder. He wasn't even breathing hard, and he minced a few steps sideways and twisted his head to look at her, asking to go again.

"In a minute," she soothed, patting him again.

He snorted.

Laughing, she turned her face up to the sun, feeling like a plant herself, deprived for too long and now able to grow. A sudden wind buffeted against her, harsher than the earlier breeze, almost as if it were displeased with her. The gelding shook his head, and she held him in tight control. For a moment, she felt watched, a prickling on the back of her neck. It was a sensation she'd experienced before, looking out from the castle, as if the very trees were aware of her,

observing, judging. Yet, nothing appeared out of place as she turned the horse in a circle. It was just the woods, the sounds of leaves swaying in the trees, birds rustling...

She rested her hand on her bow. A sudden explosion of colorful wings and beating cries shot into the sky on her right. The gelding startled, dancing and throwing his head, and she took her hand off the bow to wrestle with the reins. Pheasants, she realized, of a colorful eastern variety she had only seen a few times in her life. She considered using the bow, taking back her own game to show her captor. He knew she was a hunter; it was one of the reasons he'd chosen her. The pheasant's glossy feathers would certainly be better than a bouquet of wildflowers, beautiful as they were.

She watched the pheasants quick flapping take them to the far side of the meadow, and her eyes were caught by a jagged edge of man-worked stones shooting up beyond the trees. She couldn't help but wonder at it, so far from the old castle she and her captor inhabited. An old watch tower, perhaps?

Curiosity piqued, she again let go of the bow, deciding that if she had time to look for any game, she would choose something less rare than the pheasants; other fowl, like quail or grouse. She spurred her horse in the direction of the possible tower, excitedly speculating as to what she might find.

As a girl, she'd listened to her father tell stories of how the Ancients had built countless strongholds in the unforgiving north, enchanting structures with spires that appeared to reach the stars, and corridors that tunneled down to the mountains' roots. She'd always thought this unlikely, her father just trying to make the stories more interesting, and she'd told him so. But then, he'd given her a gift; a delicate silver cup, decorated around the bottom with a sharp, gold pattern and tiny red gems that made her think of thorns. Nothing like any cup she'd seen before.

“Your uncle found it in the buried ruins by the east wall,” he’d said, smiling as she turned the cup in her hands. “Who were they, Melet?” her father’d asked. “What did the Ancients know that we’ve forgotten?”

Of course, she’d had no answer. Still turning the cup in her hand, she’d imagined another hand, an Ancient’s hand, holding it just as she was, and she’d began to smile like him.

She tried to rein in her thoughts. There was no reason to believe that the jutting spire she rode toward was anything other than the old shell of a tower she couldn’t even climb. Certainly, she couldn’t expect to find anything like that cup, which she’d kept by her bed ever since her father had given it to her. But, after four months of exhausting what little there was to do in her captor’s castle, anything would be interesting.

She found the dilapidated remnants of a trail as the sun reached its height, and the skinny aspens thinned as pine took over. The trail led down into a gully where she stopped to let her horse have a drink from a bare trickle of water streaming over rocks, then up onto the slopes of the mountains. She checked several times on the climb, making sure she could still see the tower, like an old rib sticking out of flesh.

The pines grew tall and wide, looming over the trail as if they wanted her to turn back. They creaked as she passed, blocking the sun, blocking other sounds apart from their own ominous conversations, and she felt the same prickling on the back of her neck as of being watched. Centuries of needles created a slightly springy bed on the ground that absorbed the crunching of the gelding’s hooves, the sound traveling into the earth. She knew, in that deep in the gut way no one could explain, that she was unwanted here. Shivering, she drew in the reins and looked around, rising in her stirrups, and craning her neck all around. As in the meadow, nothing was out of place. She could go back...the air here felt chilled, like a pocket of winter that had resisted summer’s

heat. Perhaps the ruins were dangerous, the home of some wild beast, or maybe... her mind raced back to the Ancients, and the darker stories describing their uniquely cruel use of sorceries that twisted their enemies' minds.

Gritting her teeth, she spurred the gelding on. Not even her father believed those stories. She ignored the cold, displeased trees, reasoning that if she really shouldn't be here, then it was in her interest to know why. They were just trees.

Eventually, the way became steep enough that she dismounted and led the gelding on. He put his nose in her back and huffed hot air across her spine. She paused for a moment to rub her knuckles down his forehead.

He'd been a gift from her captor. Two days ago, before she could sit down for their usual evening meal, he'd stopped her and asked her to follow him. Immediately, she'd been suspicious, and surreptitiously picked up the eating knife she'd just placed on the table. It wouldn't do much good if he decided to try anything, and her mind conjured everything from ritual sacrifice to other passions, but that didn't mean she couldn't do her best to make things miserable for him. He'd led her out into the kitchen yard, and she'd nearly dropped the knife in admiring surprise. The gelding was beautiful, with a strong neck and legs, and a color she could only describe as golden. He was hers, her captor said, since she loved to hunt and had likely grown bored remaining indoors for so long. Surprised he'd even noticed her dissatisfaction, she stammered her thanks over and over. He'd jerked his head in a nod, shifted his stance from one foot to the other, and turned away as if embarrassed.

A crumbling stone arch and a few moss-covered stones lined up between the trees like broken teeth. Perhaps they were the lone remnants of a wall. She paused long enough to re-tuck her baggy pant legs into her boots, then continued her hike, still ignoring the oppressive trees.

Originally, the pants had been one of the simpler dresses she'd found in the wardrobe. She'd modified it to fit, slashing the skirt off and using the material to create a pair of serviceable, if unflattering, pantaloons. Much more practical for riding, and she'd be back in a dress before her captor returned in the evening.

Ahead of her, the trail twisted in a switchback, and she looked up to see the tower rising high and blocking the sun from her view. She smiled and kept climbing, noticing as she did that the feeling of being watched fell away as the trees thinned and the needles on the path turned to dirt and pebbles.

It took a good ten minutes to complete the climb and find another broken archway where the ground leveled out into a small yard marked off by boulders. By then, she was huffing in breath as if she'd been the one to run across the meadow. The gelding pushed at her back to move her farther into the yard, still energetic.

"Show off," she panted. She'd been sitting around in chairs for too long.

The gelding lowered his head as if to apologize but continued moving onto flat ground.

A stunted young tree grew to one side of the yard, and she made sure to tie the gelding there. Short, sturdy grass grew around the tree and he happily began trying to rip it up to eat.

Shading her eyes, Melet craned her neck back to look directly up to the tower's top. It was not as tall as she might have thought, and looked to be fairly intact from the outside. She took a moment to breathe, feeling lighter somehow, as if the tower sat above whatever unpleasantness infested the woods below and she'd emerged from being buried in it.

She ran her fingers across the age-worn stones as she entered. They were each as wide as she was tall, with light crystalline flecks imbedded within the darker granite, giving the stones a reflective depth, like miniscule windows she just might be able to see into.

In the stories, the Ancients were supposedly giants compared to men now; taller, stronger, and better formed. Looking at the tower's stones and how they arched to twice her height, she could very well believe it. Her captor's castle had stones like these only in the foundation walls, with smaller, completely different stones and timbers rotting in the walls and ceilings.

The tower was very clean within, without the dust and signs of forest life she would have expected. She blinked, eyes adjusting to the dim light and saw a broom, made of stiff grasses and thin twigs, resting beside a second doorway that appeared to lead into the mountain itself. There was nothing else in the room except the stairs circling up. They looked sturdy, but here was a mystery she hadn't expected. He had told her they were alone, and yet here was evidence to the contrary.

"Well, what have I just found?" she asked, scrutinizing the broom, and chose the doorway.

The outside light faded quickly, and she kept one hand running along the wall as the tunnel's darkness closed in. She kept her other hand on the hilt of the hunting knife she'd borrowed. She shuffled and kicked out with her feet, feeling for any holes. She could only imagine what would happen if she found a pit and fell into it.

Her foot struck wood, and she felt with her hands to discover a slatted door. She pushed gently, letting it swing silently inward.

Another darkness opened up. Stepping forward, she slid her hand around the doorway feeling along the wall, and her fingers touched metal, ran up it to feel the caged structure of a lantern. Just like the broom, it did not feel as if it were covered in grime or dust. She fumbled about to find the catch-front, reached in and felt a lump of wax firmly melted to the bottom.

She smiled, pulling out a small flint. Often, her father had accused her of carrying too many things on her person, one of the few womanly traits she whole-heartedly embraced. As a child, it

had been a game to see if she could produce whatever her father had forgotten. Her most spectacular success had occurred on a trip home from her aunt's, when the carriage had become stuck in the mud for hours. It was a short trip, and all they had to eat come evening were some unshelled nuts her aunt had gifted them. Her father had doubled over laughing when she'd produced a nutcracker from the bag she always carried. Since then, her habit had become more sophisticated, trading in the bag for concealed pockets. Now, she never carried anything that was not useful, and somehow, she always managed to have what she needed.

It did not take long for the candle to light, but it flared unbelievably bright, blinding her for a moment. She turned, blinking away sudden tears, and then stared in fascination. All around the room hung large, round discs of metal, polished to a mirrorlike quality. Each one was the size of a soldier's shield, turned to catch the flickering light of the candle and reflecting it back so that instead of one feeble, yellow glow, the room looked to be lit by hundreds. She realized her mouth was open and closed it.

There was a bed of pine boughs and sweet grass in the corner to her right, covered by dark furs, as well as a few folded blankets as colorful as the drapes in the castle. Her eyes traveled from the bedding to the adjacent wall where carved statues of a fox and wolf sat. They sat to attention, nearly life sized, tails wrapped around their feet, ears forward and alert, as if watching her. The wood used for the wolf was dark, the grain of the wood reflecting red in the light, while the fox appeared as golden as her horse. Without realizing it, she moved toward them, one hand reaching out as if to pet them, half expecting them to be warm, the tufted fur to give under her fingers.

She'd never had such talent, being much better at searching out and then catching the real thing. It was beautiful, bringing such life from something as inert as dead wood.

There were more carvings, much simpler ones in the shape of charms hanging from a few hooks set at her eye level. They spiraled in the shape of circles and ancient runes, decorated with bones and polished stones. She didn't touch them. For some reason she felt it would be even more intrusive than entering the room had been.

A low table sat shoved up against the opposite wall. Another carving hung above it in the shape of three circles strapped over two crossed sticks with colored strips of cloth. The sight of it made her skin crawl, like when the trees were watching her earlier, as if the circles were vaguely conscious. She dropped her eyes to the table, its top covered by uncarved pieces of wood, bone, and spread pieces of cloth held down by stones. There were runes painted on the cloth, alongside sketches she thought were future carvings.

She steeled herself to ignore the charmed circles and get a closer look at the contents of the table. As she moved, a shadow flickered in the mirrored candlelight. She spun towards the door, holding her knife low and ready.

"You shouldn't be here," the young man in the doorway said sharply. He held his arms rigidly at his sides, head tilted like a wary hunting bird, eyes unblinking. He wore no shoes.

"And who are you?" she asked.

"An exile," he tilted his head the other way. "Why are you here?"

"I saw the tower, and thought I'd like to climb it and see the view," she answered.

"Lost your way, did you?" he asked, dryly.

"I didn't know anyone lived here," she said, carefully straightening from her ready position, but keeping a firm grip on the knife. "Forgive my intrusion. I was curious. This is..." she lifted a hand to encompass the room, the light, "extraordinary," she finished, eyes never leaving him.

His expression shifted, reminding her now of a neglected dog suddenly confronted with a pat on the head. Then he blinked, shoulders twitching as if smoothing raised hackles. “Well, if your curiosity is satisfied, may I escort you back to your horse?”

He bowed, holding out a hand to her, in perfect imitation of a well-trained servant.

“I’m not satisfied,” she said, and watched his shoulders stiffen again. “I haven’t climbed the tower.”

“I see,” he said, frowning as he unbent. “Then be sure to walk close to the wall. The stairs aren’t as sturdy in the middle.”

“Thank you,” she said, and made sure to not rush as she walked past him back into the tower’s entry. Behind her, the room’s light went out, allowing the darkness to reclaim its space. She heard the door close, and knew he followed her, although she couldn’t hear his steps.

At the stairs, she paused, looked over to where he stood in the shadows by the broom, his head tilted again, watching. Almost she shivered, but turned the movement into placing a hand on the tower wall and quickly beginning to climb. The stairs turned at least five times, and she alternated between looking up at the square of light at the top, and at her feet to be sure she kept close to the less worn sections of stone. The stitch in her side returned about half-way up, forcing her to slow to a more sustainable pace, but she did not stop until she reached the sunlight.

A gust of air immediately pulled loose strands of her hair into her face, and she brushed them aside, gulping in a few deep breaths. The suppressed shiver overtook her as the sun warmed her arms and back. She hadn’t realized how cold the underground room had been, nor how sweaty she’d become. Rubbing her arms, she walked a few steps away from the stairs and took in the view. It was better than she’d expected.

To the north and east mountains towered close and high, blocking half the sky, but to the south and west a sea of emeralds and olives rolled out above deep shaded greens that eventually faded into a uniformed deep jade before giving way to distant blue hills. She couldn't be sure, but she chose to imagine that the hazed skyline was the beginnings of her country. For a moment, her chest hurt, a sharp pang like the stitch in her side, and she chose to blame the wind for the sudden sting of salt in her eyes. Four months gone. Some of the early crops would be in, the rabbits and snow birds would have changed their coats from white to bronze. She wondered if her council had been able to finish making the treaty with their neighbor, Lushir, without her and the wedding, or if it had all fallen apart. She wondered if anyone had told her father and mother that she was gone.

Without thinking, she reached a hand into her pocket, wrapped her fingers around a little silver ring, and clenched it tight. She should have put it in the wardrobe, hidden and less easily lost. Every morning, she traced the worked image of an arrow in vines, told herself it would be safer under the bottom board, and it always went into a pocket. It was a gift, a surprise from her soon to be groom, during a single private moment outside of all the public celebrations. He'd put it into her hand hesitantly because, as he said, it wasn't the kind of gaudy bauble usually given, but he believed sometimes simple things were best. She'd put it on for his benefit, and he'd smiled and left her alone in the palace gardens.

It'd been while twisting the ring around and around on her finger, pacing before her favorite rose bush, that her captor had suddenly appeared as if by magic. Without a word, he'd pulled her onto his horse and rode away as if all the gates and doors of her home were made of nothing more than air.

A stronger breeze blew around the tower, tugging at her hair and clothes. She shivered again, the last chill leaving her skin like shed water drops. She would be home soon. It was a

promise she muttered under her breath, just as she had while staring out the window on her first night of captivity. The edges of the ring dug into her palm. Before the year ended, she would be home.

It was high summer now. Six whole months of pretending to be satisfied, even happy with the restricted freedoms he gave her. But again, somehow, she knew going home was not a simple matter of running away. Six months felt right.

“You are from the south?” the young man said from behind her.

She glanced his way, having almost forgotten about him, then back to the ocean of trees, the sunlight outlining their tops in gold.

“Yes, and you?” she asked.

“Nowhere, really,” he said, tonelessly.

She waited for more, but he walked by her, pulling the hood of his shirt up to shade his head and sat down at a gap in the wall, swinging his legs over the edge to dangle into empty space. Briefly, she wondered if he were showing off. It was a trait she’d observed often enough in men, and other women, but he didn’t covertly glance at her, or make a show of edging his body far enough to force himself into a precarious balance. He just sat, as if it were his usual place and she weren’t even there.

“What did you mean when you said you were an exile?” she asked, moving forward enough to glance down at the drop, to see a mound of rubble dribbling down the hill. She thought it looked a little like a giant’s hand, opened wide to catch anyone who happened to tumble down. “He told me there was no one else here.” She watched the young man’s profile, waiting for a reaction. It seemed obvious to her that he’d know of her captor.

A wry smile split his mouth as he looked up at her. “What does he have you call him? No, better question: what name do you know him by?”

Vasilik the Sorcerer,” she answered, returning his tilted expression with her own.

His smile grew, as if her answer were exactly what he expected.

“What do you call him?” she asked, a little miffed.

He huffed out a laugh, “Formally, my lord. Informally, whatever I feel like comparing him to at the time.”

“You are his servant?” She decided to sit, resting her back against a stone beside his perch.

“You could say that,” he shrugged. “He rarely has need of me anymore.”

“Then, why haven’t you left?”

“I can’t,” he said, in the same sharp tone he’d first used to address her, then added calmly, “No more than you.”

“What?” she matched his sharpness.

He glanced at her, then lifted a bony arm and pointed to the south. “Do you see where the trees end?”

She twisted around and onto her knees, looking over a mossy chunk of eroded stone. “Yes.”

“You can’t go beyond them,” he said. “Neither walking nor riding.”

“How is that possible?” she asked. While she knew simply running would be a waste of her time and energy, to think that the option hadn’t even been available was like realizing she’d been put into a cage with no door.

His smile dropped, melting into what could be sympathy. “Sorcery. Everything here has it woven in. This tower, your clothing, your knife, even your horse. And the charm he gave you.”

“How’d you know about the charm,” she demanded.

“He always gives a charm,” he began.

“Like the ones in your room?”

He shook his head. “Those are different.”

“Then...” she couldn’t think of what to ask. If everything around her prevented her from leaving, could her captor watch her as well? Her hand reached for the small silver medallion he’d given her to wear. She’d accepted it, thinking of it as an attempt to show her he meant well, the kind of trinket her father would get her mother after a fight.

“He trusts you,” the young man said. “He wouldn’t have given you the horse otherwise.”

She didn’t find that reassuring, and she looked away from him to glare at the trees, refraining from touching the medallion resting around her neck.

“It won’t change you,” he continued quietly. “None of it will. The medallion, the sorcery; it protects you...” He paused for a good half a minute, long enough for her to wonder what horrible thing the sorcery would do. “It protects you from yourself,” he finished.

She turned to stare at him. “From myself?” Her voice rose.

He shifted position, leaned a little away from her. “It won’t change you,” he repeated adamantly. “It just keeps you from deliberately hurting yourself. That knife,” he nodded his head as if she still held it in her hand. “It’s normal. If you were to accidentally cut a finger or drop it on your foot, natural laws still apply. But if you tried to take it and cut your throat, you couldn’t. The knife wouldn’t let you use it like that.”

“What if I fell?” she asked, morbidly curious.

“From here?” his eyes rolled down to look at his dangling, dirt-scuffed feet. “On your own, no. If you were to accidentally misstep, or if I pushed you...”

Turning away from his sly suggestion to the blue-hazed hills, she worked to blank her face. Sorcery. Real, genuine sorcery, like in the stories of the Ancients. Nothing like the incense laden spells worked by the odd wise women who set up stalls on city corners, or Councilor Rushen's attempts to see the future by staring at a crystal. She should have fit it together, after all, her captor used the title Vasilik the Sorcerer, the only one said to have been able to stand against the Ancients. She'd assumed it was hubris; he couldn't be *that* Vasilik.

Sorcery woven into everything...

The trees at the bottom of the tower came to mind, how they'd made her want to leave; that feeling of being watched, like there was something sentient in the woods.

"What are you thinking of, princess?"

She jerked back toward him. The young man lay back with his hands behind his head, legs still dangling. He watched her sidelong.

She watched him back.

He flashed an amused smile.

"If he doesn't have much use for you, how do you know who I am?" she asked.

The smile fixed in place. "You're not the first he's brought here, and you don't hold yourself like a farmgirl."

Something cold slid into her stomach, disrupting the summer's warmth she'd soaked in.

"I don't know your name," he added, as if that should comfort her.

"You said I shouldn't be here," she said. He didn't need to know her name. "The trees tried to stop me, didn't they?"

He said nothing.

"Is it your choice, or does he want you to stay hidden?" she prodded.

“You are the first one to find this tower,” he conceded. “I hope it’s a good omen.” He closed his eyes, all expression draining away, as if suddenly too tired to continue their conversation.

“An omen of what?” she asked, frustrated.

“You should get back,” he said. “If you want to keep his trust, you’ll be there when he returns. Besides, the woods aren’t always friendly at night, even wearing his charm.”

Looking at the sun, it was still late afternoon by her calculations, but he had a point. Although her captor always left late in the morning, he habitually returned just before the sun set, always in time to prepare whatever kill he’d made for their late dinner. She grimaced.

“Then I’ll come tomorrow,” she determined.

He opened his eyes. “It’s probably not wise to make coming here a habit.”

She ignored him, stood up and brushed off her ugly pants. He watched her, and she couldn’t tell if he did so as most men did, or not.

“You never told me your name,” she said, placing her foot on a stone to re-tuck her pants into her boots.

As simple as the answer should be, he hesitated, as if pondering how rude it would be to deny her the information. She switched feet and tucked in the other hem, considered coming up with her own name for him and telling him to get used to it.

“Curi,” he said, drawing out the vowels so that it sounded like a bird call.

She nodded. It was an odd name, but the sounds of a bird seemed to fit him.

“Melet,” she said.

He half smiled, and she made her way to the stairs.

“Princess Melet,” he called. “Don’t mention me to him, or that you know of me.”

Which told her that her first instinct had been correct. She had found something her captor didn't want her to know about. She left him there, and only looked back once as she rode away to see if she could see his legs over the lip of the tower's top.

Curi

I watched her disappear under the tall trees, saw her turn once to look up. I held still, the wind tickling the soles of my dangling feet, wondering if she would wave. She didn't, but my hand twitched as though she had, and then she was gone. I fell back down onto the warm stones. The sun blinded me, and I closed my eyes, pressing my hands against my face. Red after images burst like millions of ants crawling across my eyelids.

She had found my tower.

The thought echoed over and over in my head.

The sun began to hurt, a prickling burn against my exposed skin. I never spent this long under its influence, and I knew I'd pay for it later, but I didn't move, afraid if I did, I might find out I'd imagined the whole encounter.

She had found me. Never mind that she'd convinced him to let her out, impressive as it was, it had happened occasionally with the others. There were places that he did not want anyone to go. Dangerous places, hidden places. The sorceries embedded into the ground should have kept her from even noticing my tower existed, and I couldn't imagine my master becoming lax on their upkeep.

"Bright gods," I breathed into my palms, and sat up.

Time had passed. The sun was setting, turning everything into shades of orange and purple. Shadows crept along the tower's stones, waiting for their turn to dominate. Bright day giving way to dark night, just as it had every day of my existence.

The lengthening shadows were a relief after so long in the heat, but I stayed in the last beams of light, watching the forest greens cool to blues and then greys, the sky transform from monotonous singularity to a vivid rainbow. Directly across from me, the descending sun dulled to copper-red, seeming as delicate as the beads from her dress.

A few last thin rays of yellow light stretched out, not ready to give in to the rising night. I lifted a hand, as if I could catch the last vestiges of offered heat.

"Are you the one?" I asked, and the sun vanished.

Chapter 3

Melet

Melet was at the castle and back in one of the more tailored dresses, complete with embroidery, before her captor, Vasilik, rode into the ruined courtyard, a roebuck slung across his saddle. As if for the first time, she noted that the fading sunlight didn't appear to touch him in the same way as it did everything else. He appeared shadowed; the light repelled.

After her day in the open, the oddness of the castle seemed more insistent to her. Walking down to courtyard, she'd noticed how the shadows in the hallways seemed deeper than they should be, that the stillness of the air lacked even the hum of insects, and yet nothing appeared to actually be wrong. She was almost glad he was back. Almost.

She smiled and exclaimed over his kill, taking care to mention how clever he must be to have found such a well-formed animal.

"I've never been so lucky in a hunt," she finished. "Perhaps someday, you'll show me how it's done."

He smiled back. "Did you ride out today?" he asked, dismounting and leading his horse, the buck still across the saddle, to the back of the yard and the open-sided shed set up for cleaning a kill.

"I did," she said, walking beside him. "The gelding is perfect. I've never had an animal like him. Though, I have no name for him yet."

He nodded, satisfied.

There was an awkward beat, their feet crunching in the gravelly dirt, where she wondered if she should say more.

“I came across several pheasants. I don’t know what they are called, but they had yellow and green plumage,” she tried.

“They are eastern,” he said.

Another silence. They continued walking.

At the shed, he hoisted the buck down from the saddle, easily placing it across his shoulders. She took the reins and led his dark stallion a few feet away, eyeing the animal for any mischief.

Although he was as beautiful as her gelding, she had found he tolerated her touch only so long as he could still see Vasilik. He snorted and sidestepped to be able to keep her at a distance, like he expected her to try something audacious such as setting a foot into his stirrup. She wondered if that would count as an attempt to harm herself, and if the horse or the stirrup would prevent her.

Vasilik’s explanation for the behavior was simply that the animal had only ever been around him, and so was exclusively loyal. Not even producing treats from her pockets had seduced the animal. So, she split her attention between watching the horse for any sudden moves, and Vasilik as he effortlessly lifted the buck by the hind legs onto the hooks set into the shed’s roof beams. His strength no longer surprised her, unusual as it was. She wondered now if like the sorcery used to keep her in and protected, he used sorcery to make the deer lighter, or give himself extra strength.

He smiled again as he took the reins from her, leaving the buck in her hands to clean while he took care of his cantankerous mount.

She didn’t mind; had volunteered sometime around her second month out of the itching need to do something. It was a job she knew and understood, princess or no. She’d shocked more than one dignitary and courtier on hunting expeditions back home by not leaving the cleaning to her servants, but in her mind, it didn’t make sense not to see the entire process through.

In some ways, the most tedious part of the process for her was tying her skirts and sleeves up and back, then putting on the fitted leather apron to keep herself from being splattered by any blood and other bits. She would have preferred to wear clothing where it didn't matter if a little blood splashed on the hem, but here, just as on those courtly hunting expeditions, looking the part of a princess while still performing the gutting appeared to impress. The last item was a cloth around her mouth and nose to ward off the stink once she cut through the outer skin and muscle into the gut.

She picked up one of the smaller knives and began at the top. Vasilik had hung the buck by its back legs, leaving the front two sticking out like spindly red twigs. It was a beautiful hide, a ruddy orange-red that she felt shouldn't go to waste.

Stepping close, she carefully worked the knife around and into the thin layer of belly skin, then gently dragged it down across the gut to the ribs. She found that using his tools somehow made the job easier, cleaner, and quicker than it should be, so it only took her a few minutes to reach her arms into the open cavity, sever the connecting tissues away from the spine and drag the pale pink and white organs out, letting them flop into the large bucket at her feet. She wiped her hands free of the sticky fluids and blood, then selected a slightly curved knife to begin skinning.

She thought of what Curi had told her, that everything here held some kind of sorcery. If she concentrated, she could feel a tingle in the knife she held, a bit like the tickle of rain hitting the palms of her hands. She hoped this meant the sorcery in them was small, and wondered if perhaps Vasilik could have missed something.

The roebuck's skin slid away from the meat with a wet flapping against itself. She set it aside on a table and chose one of the largest blades to deal with the head. This was her least favorite part, finding the right vertebra to cut through while holding onto the head to keep it from swaying

away from her. The knife, however, seemed to know what to do, sliding into the neck as easily as she'd sliced the belly. A few quick sawing motions, and the head came away to thump onto the ground, black tongue protruding slightly. She set it on top of the guts in the bucket and washed her arms and hands in clean water, rubbing salt across them to finish the job. After another inspection to be sure she'd removed any vestiges of membrane skin, she retrieved a bucket of water and dumped it over the carcass to wash away any bits of fur or impurities.

It was at that moment that her captor returned from bedding down his stallion. Silently, he scanned her work, then lifted the whole carcass off the hooks and carried it towards the kitchen door. Before following him, she removed her apron and face cloth, carefully returning her dress to its pristine state. She glanced at the mess of blood and buckets. There were no flies, nothing moving over the sticky, white intestines as there should be. Deliberately, she turned away.

Everything in her still wanted to clean it all up, even though she knew that the job would be done by tomorrow. It was the same way with the kitchen; it always managed to be back in order at the beginning of every day. It left her with that out of place itch between her shoulder blades, made her want to check every nook and cranny to see if the shadows would move on their own.

The tower hadn't felt like this, and only patches of the woods had. Without thinking, she reached into her pocket and felt for the ring, then looked up at the pale stars just beginning to show their faces.

Inside the kitchen, the whole buck was spread across a grate suspended over coals, roasting slowly. She sighed as she passed through, the smell of fat melting and herbs giving the illusion of normality.

When she'd first begun hunting and become good enough to bring home what she caught, she'd sat in the kitchen watching the cook turn her raw cuts of meat into something divine. Garlic he'd said was best, along with fat and salt. That's what made everything edible.

This kitchen seemed to understand that. It was one sorcery she could appreciate.

She returned to her rooms to bathe and change yet again, leaving the dress in the adjacent wash room. It too would somehow show up clean by the morning.

She paused before a polished, mirrored plate hanging beside the wardrobe, to make final adjustments to her appearance. Her hair was pulled back away from her neck, held in place by a braided headband, and ribbons woven through the long braids. Jewelry adorned her throat and fingers, and she reclasped the belt about her waist to lay smooth against the beadwork. It was the yellow dress she'd arrived in, designed as a scaled back mimic of her wedding dress. Her hand crept to the pockets, feeling for the ring, touched it briefly. She smoothed the fabric flat, lifted her chin and practiced dipping her knees in a curtsy, then straightened satisfied: princess and woman, in that order.

"The best armor," she told herself, as she had every night.

She made her way back down into the hall for the evening meal.

The dining hall was a secondary, smaller hall to the grand receiving hall at the front of the castle, but half of its roof was gone. This hall was still large enough she and her captor only used the end where the large fireplace was located, with a table and set of cushioned chairs before it. When she entered, the fire was already lit, as well as a large lantern above the table. The shadows seemed to pull back as she walked to her chair. She tried to follow them with her eyes, but she could never be certain if she really saw them move.

She didn't sit down. Instead, she watched the fire, fingers clasped behind her back and waited for him to join her. It was so still, she thought if she listened hard enough, she'd be able to hear her own heart beating over the fire. A log in the fireplace broke, the ends tumbling to become part of the graveyard of coals. She was tempted to try and touch the flames, to see if she could, wondering how close she could get before any protective sorcery took effect.

His boots tapped on the stairs, and she shook herself, turning to him with her usual smile.

He wore green, a tunic embroidered in yellow and black. His hair hung loose to his shoulders, and despite the white that invaded his temples and beard, or the lines around his eyes and mouth, he remained straight and graceful. She was struck by how tall he appeared, almost unusually so, but it could have been due to the flickering of light and shadows about his person.

That graceful stride carried him to her, and he took one of her hands and bowed over it. Every night he'd done this without speaking, as if her mere presence were a gift to thank her for. His hand was cool and calloused, his fingers lightly wrapped around hers in a grip she would find easy to withdraw from. A month ago, she'd been tempted to do just that, to jerk her hand away and reject his curtesy. Thankfully, her diplomatic training had asserted itself, and she accepted his demonstration.

He lifted his eyes to hers slowly, taking in every inch of her chosen attire and how it complimented her. She could feel her skin growing warm, reminded herself that there was nothing to fear. He met her eyes, and beneath the discomfort this ritual created, she saw the longing in him said more of grief than desire. For some reason, it hurt her, like a thorn caught between her ribs.

She dipped her head, returning his gesture. He uncurled his fingers from hers, letting her slide her hand away. As he took his seat, she retreated to the kitchen to find prepared plates and bring them out. Before the cooking pit, she drew in a breath full of warm bread and garlic,

smoothed her dress one last time. She was pleased that her hands were steady as she picked up the wide, wooden plates.

First, she served him, setting the plate between his knife and fork, then carried her own to the opposite side of the table where she set it down on the polished wood and lowered herself onto the chair. She moved the sleeves of her dress to lay artfully across the chair's arms, drew her braids forward to frame her shoulders and bodice.

He watched her silently, his hands resting on either side of his plate.

Like a dancer about to begin a set, she moved her hands in unison to lift her fork and knife, brought them up to hover over her steaming plate. She cast a quick glance at her captor, making sure she had his attention. As always, his gaze was riveted on the utensils like they were wands in her hands.

She dipped the fork down into the meat, drawing the knife after in a glide back and forth to sever the roasted muscle. The fork lifted into the air, arching backward to bring the chosen piece high for her to catch between her teeth, then descended, slowly, silver tines flashing in the light, to pose beside the knife. She closed her eyes as she savored the bite, letting the herbs fill her with memories of better meals. Then, she repeated the set, palpably aware of her audience.

Down and up, back and forth, her fork and knife danced in a slow, waltzing step, twining, and cutting in new patterns, glistening with beads of oil and sauce. Through it all, he did not move or speak, only watched, entranced, as if her act of eating worked some kind of sorcery on him.

During her first month, she'd tried to make conversation, only to receive short, one-word answers from him. She hadn't known what to do. Even Lushir's ambassador had eventually opened up in the face of her polite persistence. Her captor was oblivious. His stillness and her embarrassment had grown, until she could barely sit still long enough to eat anything. Every night,

he only watched with an unnerving intensity she had only seen in predators, and the shadows seeming longer behind him than anywhere else in the room. She couldn't look at him, had found her heartrate and breathing accelerating every time she sat at the table. Without realizing it, she'd turned to eating quickly, desperate to be away from the fire's heat, the silence, and the struggle to swallow under his scrutiny. Finally, one night she'd picked up her fork, set it down again and stared at her plate without touching a single bite, sick of the pantomime. She'd wanted to scream at him, wanted to demand he stop watching her. He'd stood, chair scraping against the stone floor, and said, "Please, eat without fear." Then, he left her alone. She'd stared at her plate, and still couldn't eat.

Now, savoring the last bite of buttered greens, she delicately returned the fork and knife to their original places, their dance over for the evening.

"Thank you," he said, as he did every night.

"Always," she replied.

With another bow, he left to his own rooms.

She leaned back in her chair and sighed. For a time, she listened to the crackle of the fire, watched the light shimmer in the now congealing streaks of fat left on her plate. Her hand wandered back into her pocket and curled around the ring.

Chapter 4

Melet

“Where did you get all the metal?” she asked.

On his knees, Curi stopped in his repairs to a large, tanned hide, tilting his head her way.

They were on top of the tower again, Melet perched on a broken stone that had fallen inward and now made for an excellent stool. She hadn’t noticed it before, but over to the north side of the tower, part of the wall rose higher, as though at some distant time in its history, there had possibly been a roof. Stacked against this wall were several long poles, pointed at the ends. Curi had shown her places in the wall where the poles could be fitted, and the large skin stretched between them to make a kind of canopy that protruded out from the stone wall.

“Most of the hard storms come from that way,” he told her.

There were some holes in the hide, and he pulled it down and spread it across the tower’s stones. Watching him, she tried several other questions, only to realize he could be nearly as reticent in speech as her captor.

He waved in the direction of the mountains, “There’s another set of ruins up that way. They came from there.”

Another set of ruins? She felt as if she’d just been handed a sweet.

“Would you show me?” she asked, already feeling a grin playing at her mouth.

He blinked at her, as if confused. “Now?” he asked.

“Why not? Do you have a good reason not to?”

He glanced down at the hide, the string gut in his hand.

“How often do you get to do something out of the ordinary these days?” she asked, watching for the small deflation of his shoulders to tell her he’d given way. He didn’t seem very

enthusiastic about fixing the hide. “I’ll pay you,” she added. “Next time, I’ll bring you a bird. A fat one.” She had no idea if he hunted on his own, but based on the tendons she could see in his wrists, she thought it unlikely.

His shoulders dropped in a sigh.

She helped him roll the hide back up.

There was a trail around the back of the tower that sidled along the side of the hill. She kept her eyes on her footing as she followed him up the slight incline. Bits of granite pebbles littered the path, held in place by tough grasses and tree roots. Should she slip, it was a long way down, and at the moment she didn’t want to test the intentional harm theory.

She looked up to see that Curi had pulled ahead of her and shook her head. There had to be something odd about him too. His feet were still bare, and he seemed completely unbothered by the rough stones he stepped on.

“You must know a lot about his lands,” she called. Trying to get him to talk, yes, but also to allow herself a chance to catch up with him.

He paused, turning back to watch her progress, the wry smile hovering. Once she reached him, she stopped to look out and back toward the tower. She was pleased to see that it was farther away than she thought, which meant she was getting stronger again.

“If you want me to slow down, you only have to ask,” he said.

She refused to glare at him. “I meant what I said. You know a lot, don’t know? How did you find the ruins we’re headed to?”

He shrugged, “I just came across them, back when I did a lot more exploring.” He turned to start climbing again. “Why are you interested?”

“Someone once told me,” she said, climbing after him, “that the land holds the bones of where we came from. In my experience, you can learn a lot from what happened in the past. Besides, how often will I get to see what the Ancients built?”

“The Ancients?” he sounded surprised. “People still know about them?”

“Yes,” she said, and then saved her breath for the hike.

When they came to a stream, Melet plunked herself down on a protruding tree root. The tree itself angled out of the hillside, then shot heavenward, providing much needed shade. As they’d continued upward, the trees had become more scarce, unable to compete with the stones. Curi knelt beside the water where it bounced out and over a root, filled his hands and drank several times. She waited for a minute, leaning her head back and basking in the shade, feeling her blood slow. Once her pulse settled, she reached into one of the many pockets lining her clothing and produced a small wooden cup. Curi looked mildly surprised but made no mention of it as she filled it and drank.

“So,” he began, “What stories do they still tell about the Ancients?”

Setting the cup aside on a rock to dry, she shifted around to sit more comfortably. “Well, they’re supposed to be either friendly with the old gods, they’re supposed to be tall and better than ordinary men. Some stories even say they were giants,” she paused, realizing how intently he was listening. “I’m not a storyteller. I just, remember some things. I was always more interested in whether the buried buildings we sometimes found around the kingdom were built by them, or if they were just a myth.”

“They existed,” he said, but before she could ask how he knew, he added, “Go on.”

“Well, the main story that most scholars agree on is that after they lost favor with the gods, they were cruel and greedy and started warring among themselves, which made them vulnerable

to invasion by other people. Some of the stories say they were defeated in one night by the Andish armies, some that it was by trickery or betrayal, but who really knows. It all led to the Andish people taking over the lands and the Ancients dying off. I know there's one story about them cursing their capital city so no one can stand to live there, but..." she trailed off.

He sat so still, as if he were made of stone, eyes narrowed in concentration. She was reminded of her captor, and their dinners, but then she blinked, and he was rising to his feet.

"We're close to the ruins," he said, smiling, and offered her a hand up.

The ruins were impressive, and completely different than the tower or castle. After she and Curi had rounded the mountain, the trail dropped back down into the tree line and narrowed into nothing before a broken pavilion.

"Oh," she gasped before she could stop herself. Almost reverently, she stepped between the columns, craned her neck back and turned in a circle. Beneath her feet, brown needles crunched and disturbed the green silence. Even the shadows appeared green and lazy. She felt here that whatever crept through the woods and castle had never even been heard of. Sunlight streamed down in patches like gateways of gold. Already, she wanted to stay here.

"There's more," he said, and she could hear he was pleased by her reaction.

She followed him over to an immense, single slab of rock resting against the slope of the hill, as if it had slid down and settled upright before the pavilion, wanting to share whatever made this place so perfect.

Curi stepped close to the slab and walked behind it. Astonished, she followed him and found a gap between the hill and the rock. Deep darkness seeped out of the narrow hole, but he entered as if it were nothing.

“There’s a torch,” his voice emerged from the blackness. “I left it here. May I borrow your flint?”

Quickly she pulled it out and stepped so she was half in and half out of the crack. It was only once she felt his hand take the flint from hers, that she wondered how he’d known she had it. He must have been watching her the whole time she was investigating his living space. She felt a little heat creep into her face, then shook it away. Embarrassment was pointless now.

A glow sprang up, lining his face in yellow. He gave her back the flint, then held out his hand for her to take as she stepped inside.

“Watch your step,” he said, and she looked down to see shallow stairs leading into the earth.

Down they went, five, then ten steps. Not as far as she would have expected. He let go of her hand, and she stood still, watching the torchlight move away from her, but then it flared as brilliantly as it had in the tower.

She couldn’t help another gasp.

“Every now and then, I come back here when I need something,” he said. “Otherwise, I leave it in peace.”

To her, it looked like a storage cache, the kind set up for war. Pieces of armor stacked one atop the other, swords and shields, spurs and bits of horse tack, large bins that looked like they probably once held grain.

“So, the metal discs,” she began.

“I stole the idea from the Ancients,” he said matter of fact. “It took me a while to figure out how it worked. To the set the torch down in the right place, and then to be able to replicate it back

in the tower.” He was looking around too, at the remnant evidence of a civilization. “The discs, I think, are the same stuff as the shields. They’re about the same size at any rate.”

She began moving around the room, inspecting everything, while he sat down on the steps and watched. There was something different about everything here, something she couldn’t quite place. She began picking things up, holding them with her eyes closed, then setting them back down. They felt normal.

“Are we still within his lands?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “We can’t leave them.”

She held up a spearhead. “There’s no sorcery in them.”

He came over to her, took the spearhead, frowned, and carefully handed it back. She waited for him to say something, but he continued to frown, reached out and touched a dusty breastplate.

“Dark gods,” he muttered, and not to her. “I’ve grown so used to...” He trailed off. Then his attention snapped back to her so quickly she almost took a step back. “Cursed,” he hissed.

“Cursed?” she repeated, hoping he’d explain.

“You said in one of the stories, the Ancients cursed their city so none could live there.”

“Yes,” she agreed, not seeing the connection. “But how could that possibly be. We find ruins all the time in my country, you live in one.”

“And yet you know there is sorcery. You’ve been living in it for months,” he pointed out, he started to pace in the bit of space between the spearhead and the breastplates. “So why isn’t it here?”

“Are you trying to tell me,” she said, “that this Ancients’ curse is real and stops his sorcery?”

He stopped pacing, ran a hand over the breastplate again. “I...I don’t know.” He looked up at her, and she couldn’t see the wild dog or the underfed bird. It was something different, calculating and hesitantly hopeful. “Perhaps...” he again trailed off.

“Perhaps?” she encouraged him to continue, but he turned away and wouldn’t say anymore, except that they needed to leave.

Curi

The moment she left on her golden mount, I went down into my tower room, and didn’t bother to light the lamp. I was unsure which disturbed me more, Melet herself, or what she’d found that I had missed all these years.

It should not be possible. My master controlled the land, and I knew those ruins were within his territory. My mind spun, and I found myself digging my fingers into my arms, as if the pressure could give me clarity.

Instinctively, I wanted to reach for the rune bones kept hidden under my bedding. If I could find the right question, perhaps this time they would answer. I dug my fingers deeper into my flesh, until they bruised against my bones. They wouldn’t answer me, he had made sure of that long ago.

And Melet? Her bright face swam in my vision. I couldn’t deny it anymore. She could be the one, and not because I’d seen anything like her fortune. Only once before had my master given another a horse, trusted her enough to wander about his lands. That one had never met me, never understood about the layers of curses that riddled the land, but she also could have been the one. Could have, until she decided to try and burn him, then left him for dead and rode home. She forgot about his sorcery. I never asked what kind of curse he sent after her.

But Melet? She planned carefully, I could see it when she asked me questions, her need to understand.

Was she the one? I still shied away from answering myself in the definitive, but I had the feeling...just a feeling, no matter how much I wanted otherwise, that soon I would have to risk finally answering that question.

I bowed my head to my knees, praying without much hope that I didn't choose wrong.

Chapter 5

Melet

She pulled out the board from the wardrobe before riding out to see Curi the next day, removed what she'd hidden and returned it to her pocket. Her fingers brushed the ring, and she told herself again, that she would make it home.

She waved to her captor as he rode out on his dark horse, heading south on errands she did not know, and today, she asked.

"Today, I will ride the borders, make sure they are safe," he said, his face seeming shadowed even in the brilliant sun. He did not see her wave, already turned and galloping out of the yard, and once he disappeared, she saddled her horse and turned north.

"What does he mean when he says he's checking that the borders are safe? Safe from what, either of us leaving?" she asked. They sat in the courtyard, and she had begun inexpertly whittling down a long stick, thinking it could turn into a walking stick, although it was mostly just to keep her hands busy.

Curi was back to repairing the canopy hide, and he hadn't said a word about yesterday, barely speaking at all or even looking at her. He looked pale, however, and if possible, even thinner. She reminded herself she owed him a fat bird.

"The line between these lands and the rest of the world. They move sometimes, and he must reset them."

"With sorcery." she judged. "Is it meant to also keep people out?"

“Not necessarily,” he said, almost warily. “But most don’t like the feel of it, or these lands, even if they don’t know what it is, so they stay away. He knows if someone crosses it, in either direction.”

It made sense to her; a border was useless without the ability to monitor who was coming and going. More importantly she asked, “How do the borders move? Or why do they move?”

Curi sat up, leaving the patch over the hole he intended to sew into place. She wondered if he would answer. He looked tired, not like he’d overexerted himself, but like something had been raked to the surface that he didn’t want to think about.

“How do your people teach sorcery?” he asked.

“We don’t,” she said, and watched him nod as though he expected it. “It’s not that it doesn’t exist. The God’s men would say that it does, and those who practice it...well,” she waved her hand about to take in everything. “It’s not like this.”

He frowned.

“In my experience,” she continued. “Everyone who claims to be a sorcerer or be attuned to it turn out to be frauds. There are stories of the great sorcerers, people who could draw on the power of the old Brighter and Darker gods of nature. But, if I believed all the palm readers and prophets who came to my father’s court during festivals claiming to see true visions, I should be happily married and with ten children by now.”

He snorted a laugh.

“My mother did have a charm,” she set her carving aside, reached down and pulled out the one Vasilik had given her. “It was like this. It was passed down from her great grandmother, and it supposedly protected the wearer from being deceived. I remember she let me hold it once, and it tingled a little. But she was always perceptive with or without wearing it, so I can’t be sure how

real or strong a charm it was. I don't even know if she still has it anymore." She put Vasilik's charm away. "I believe I am beginning to be able to tell the difference." She thought of the deep shadows and apparently self-cleaning kitchen in the castle, and she thought of the ruins. "Yesterday certainly helped." She watched him sidelong, to see if he turned away, trying to ignore her. His fingers reached down and fiddled with the patch.

"Princess," he said. "You call him Vasilik the Sorcerer. Do you know the stories that surround him?"

"I told you, I'm not a good storyteller," she said, beginning to feel irritated that she continued to give him information without receiving any. And then he surprised her.

"I know," he nodded. "But I have not heard anything from outside in a very long time. You're the only one that I've ever talked to. And yesterday..." he shook his head as if to clear it, laughed in a way that brought back the image of the dog. "Did you know he asked me to watch you, your first night here? It's one of the few things he calls on me for now. He always wants to know if you are the one he's been waiting for."

Her mouth had turned dry, her stomach rising like bad meat in the gut. "Always? How many times have you done this?"

"Too many," he said, one hand reached over and dug into his wrist, clenching hard enough the tendons stood out through too-white skin.

"What did you tell him?" she had to ask, afraid as she was of the answer.

"I told him what I tell him every time," he said. "I don't know."

Her relief allowed her to swallow the lump rising in her throat. She reached into her pocket and clenched the ring.

“The story I know says,” she began, shakily. “That the north is haunted by an immortal sorcerer. He steals young women before their wedding day and they are never seen again. There are two versions of why he steals them. In one, he wants to marry them himself, in the other, he sacrifices them to keep himself immortal, sometimes it is both. He hasn’t done either of those things.” She wasn’t sure why she added that last, even if it was true. The worst Vasilik did was stare at her over dinner.

But it was well known that anyone who tried to live in the far north country, this country, never had good harvests, and spoke of strange visions and hauntings. No one stayed long, and the north was left as wild lands where only the bravest hunters went to find the best game, but often coming back changed and warning others not to waste their time. Those same farmers and brave men told stories of young women disappearing, stolen away by who knew what. But people were always going missing, and it was just as likely those women had run away for a better life in the city, a phenomenon also known to be common. She’d considered, before her forced ascension to her father’s place, of coming here herself. She believed the stories were superstition getting the better of the farmers’ and hunters’ imaginations, and she wanted to prove them wrong. The north was wasted country, and hers could use a place to expand.

And now here she was, in the heart of it, finding out all too well that none of it was superstition.

“Tell me.” she said suddenly, getting off her rock and kneeling in front of him.

He recoiled, leaning his upper body away from her. “Tell you what, exactly?” he asked.

Something was teasing at her. Her mother called it her intuition, old gifts passed down through the family, the sort of thing that let her feel the live tingle from a charm. Melet had always called it luck, and her pockets. Her mother had asked her how she knew what to put in her pockets?

It didn't matter. Right now, she knew, just as she'd known yesterday's ruins were not enchanted, that she needed what Curi knew.

"Everything," she said.

He studied her with that birdlike tilt of his head. "Why?"

She smiled as she drew in a deep breath, reached out and carefully touched the hand bruising his wrist. It was cold. "Because, I think you'd like to leave this place, and I think you can't do it on your own. I will do whatever it takes to escape, but I don't think I can do it on my own."

"And you think I can tell you how to get away from him?" His amusement was forced, voice dropping hoarsely. His hand trembled, and she covered it with hers. "There have been hundreds of princesses and farmer's daughters here before you. Every single one of them tried to escape in some way, by running or trying to let fate have them. Their families crossed the line and tried to free them. He always won, without exception."

"Maybe," she said calmly, "I'm the one that will. You don't know."

He half smiled, recognizing his own words twisted to her advantage.

"None of them found you, you told me so," she added.

He half nodded. "I doubt that changes anything."

"Doesn't it? Yesterday we found something even you weren't aware of. There's a place his sorcery can't get to," she reminded, trying not to grip his hand too hard.

He didn't answer. This close, she could see a small scar peeping from his dark hairline, noticed that his breathing was so slow and measured as to be hard to detect. She didn't dwell on it, waited for him to shed whatever held him back.

He still said nothing, but she felt he did not want to pull away, that he searched for something in her that she did not understand. He twisted his hands out from hers, catching hers by the wrist and turning her palm up, spreading her fingers out. With his other hand, he traced a line between the pulse in her wrist and the tip of her longest finger, then looked down, she did the same. Her hand began to cramp before he let it go, but he sighed and stood, leaving her kneeling on the stretched hide. He walked over to the edge of the yard. She couldn't tell if he had seen something in her palm that troubled him. He muttered something under his breath.

“You wish me tell you how to be free of him,” he said over his shoulder.

“Yes,” she affirmed, also standing. “I have ruled in my father's place for five years. I have made peace with four kingdoms my advisors and father said would never hear reason. I know when a hunt is worth my while, and I do not stop. Where you say hundreds have failed, I will succeed.” She looked around, and swept a hand out to take in the trees and mountains. “It seems to me that this place of haunted stories needs freeing.” It was then a thought occurred to her, one she knew would work, rising from the depth of wherever such knowledge came from. She knew it was right. “Will you bargain with me?”

He spun so quickly she barely saw the movement. “What?” He asked, as if she'd hurt him.

“Will you bargain with me?” she repeated. “Tell me all you know, the truth of who you are, of who Vasilik really is, and of this place. Tell me so I can understand how to be free to go home.” She wavered on the last word, had refused to say it out loud until then. In the subsequent pause, another thought came. She hoped she was not making a mistake, but what did she have to lose. “And name your price.”

“Do you understand what you ask?” he almost hissed.

“Name your price,” she said again. Refusing to look away from his stricken stare, refusing to show any of her own hesitancy. “It is only right that things be equal between us. What do you want in return?”

“Bargains are double edged,” he said, and she thought he looked more animal, more like her captor, as if suddenly the shadows weren’t acting right. “Rarely do they end as expected.”

“Need I repeat myself again?” she asked.

“No,” he shook his head, looking away, and seeming to diminish back into the wild dog. She could not be sure if he was answering her question or refusing her offer. “I made sure he couldn’t die,” he said, as if he were confessing a terrible mistake.

It did not make sense why he should tell her that; the stories acknowledged that Vasilik the Sorcerer was immortal. But, once again a thought seemed to dredge up from mental depths she did not know. “Anything that has been done, must have a way of being undone and made right. Nature demands it.”

What little color he had drained away, as if her last words were more of a shock than asking him to bargain. Curiously, however, he then seemed to change, his hesitancy disintegrating as if he were a falcon molting old feathers. He laughed. She wanted to shiver, a kind of tingle running across her skin like when holding Vasilik’s tools. For a moment she wondered if he were even human.

“Dark and Bright Gods,” he invoked, looking up at the sky, one hand spreading palm down, and in that moment, she could believe that despite appearances, he was old. “If he finds out...” he began, watching her carefully.

“He won’t. We tread carefully,” she said, injecting the surety she used before going into a negotiation that could end in a war. They would not lose, there could be no doubt in them. She saw

the moment he believed her, smile softening from what he'd been before, and she breathed more easily.

"I will tell you the truth, all the truth. And perhaps..." He did not finish the thought aloud, instead he shook himself, almost as if he were shedding any last tenacious old feathers. He returned to the hide, picked up her discarded knife and drew it across his right palm. He held it out towards her.

A blood pact. She'd never made one, but knew that in the old days, blood sealed an agreement. There were even old treaties she'd found in her father's archives sealed with it. In the old stories, which she'd better start believing, it meant sorcery was involved. She accepted her knife and drew it across her right palm, then reached for his hand.

"In return," he said, grasping her hand so the cuts touched, "you will kill him for me."

She squeezed his hand as hard as she could, and did not mention how the tingle grew stronger, and almost seemed to worm its way around her wrist and into her hand. It must be doing the same to his, his smile more a baring of teeth.

"So," he said, withdrawing his hand. "Where do you wish me to begin?"

Clenching and unclenching her fingers, Melet watched her blood continue to ooze. He didn't seem bothered at all. She reached with her unbloodied hand into another pocket and pulled out linen strips; something she always kept around, just in case.

"Tell me how you met him," she said, neatly wrapping her hand.

"That far back?" he asked, hesitantly accepting the strip she held out to him.

"I have just agreed to kill him for you," she said, wondering why he would balk. He had agreed. "Sorcerer or not, evil or not, I need to understand the whole of why." She'd never killed a man, but she knew that even if all it took was a shot or a knife in the right place, even if she found

out he truly was a monster and had murdered hundreds himself, even though it was the only way for her to be free, killing Vasilik would be nothing like killing a deer.

He sighed, twisting a simple knot in the linen with one hand. She didn't see any red on the bandage. "Very well," he said. "That day began with a nightmare."

Bibliography

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Penelopiad*. Cannongate Books. Edinburgh, Scotland, 2005. Print
- Beagle, Peter. *The Last Unicorn*. 1968. ROC, 2008. Print
- King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Scribner, New York, 2000. Print
- Lachman, Gary. *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination*. 2017. Floris Books, Edinburgh, 2022. Print
- Nix, Garth. "Endings." *Across the Wall: A Tale of the Abhorsen and Other Stories*. HarperTeen, 2006. Print
- Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of a Folktale*. 1958. Translated by Laurence Scott, Martino Fine Books, 2015. Print
- Rothfus, Patrick. *The Name of the Wind*. DAW Books, New York, 2009. Print
- Temple, Emily. "In Defense of Worldbuilding." *Literary Hub*, 12 Apr. 2019, lithub.com/in-defense-of-worldbuilding/. Accessed 12 Jan. 2024.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*. 1954. Ballantine Books, 1965. Print
- Vogler, Christopher. *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. Michael Wiese Productions. 2020. Print
- Weiser, Jason. "5A-Slavic Folklore: Tried and Died." *Myths and Legends*. www.mythpodcast.com/115/5a-russian-folklore-tried-and-died.
- Weiser, Jason. "5B-Slavic Folklore: The First Horcrux." *Myths and Legends*. www.mythpodcast.com/157/5b-russian-folklore-the-first-horcrux/.
- "Why We Need Fantasy: Neil Gaiman in Conversation." *YouTube*, British Library, 13 Dec. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LX8ksM3zUPs&t=282s.
- Wilson, Colin. *The Occult: A History*. 1979. Watkins Publishing, London, 2015. Print

Curriculum Vita

Afton Reed was born on December 31, 1986. She grew up in Cache Valley Utah, where she graduated from Mountain Crest High School, Hyrum, Utah in 2005. She began working on her bachelor's degree at Utah State University in 2006. During 2008 and 2009 she served as a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Oklahoma, Oklahoma City Mission, where she served honorably. Afterwards, she returned to Utah to complete her degree in education. She successfully completed a bachelor's degree in English Teaching with a minor in History Teaching in 2016.

After graduating, she taught in Glendale, Arizona, and Tooele, Utah, where she also began teaching classes in introductory creative writing.

She entered the Graduate School of The University of Texas at El Paso to pursue a master's degree in Creative Writing in 2021. While doing so, she has continued in her capacity as an English and History teacher to 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students.

Email: areedghost@gmail.com